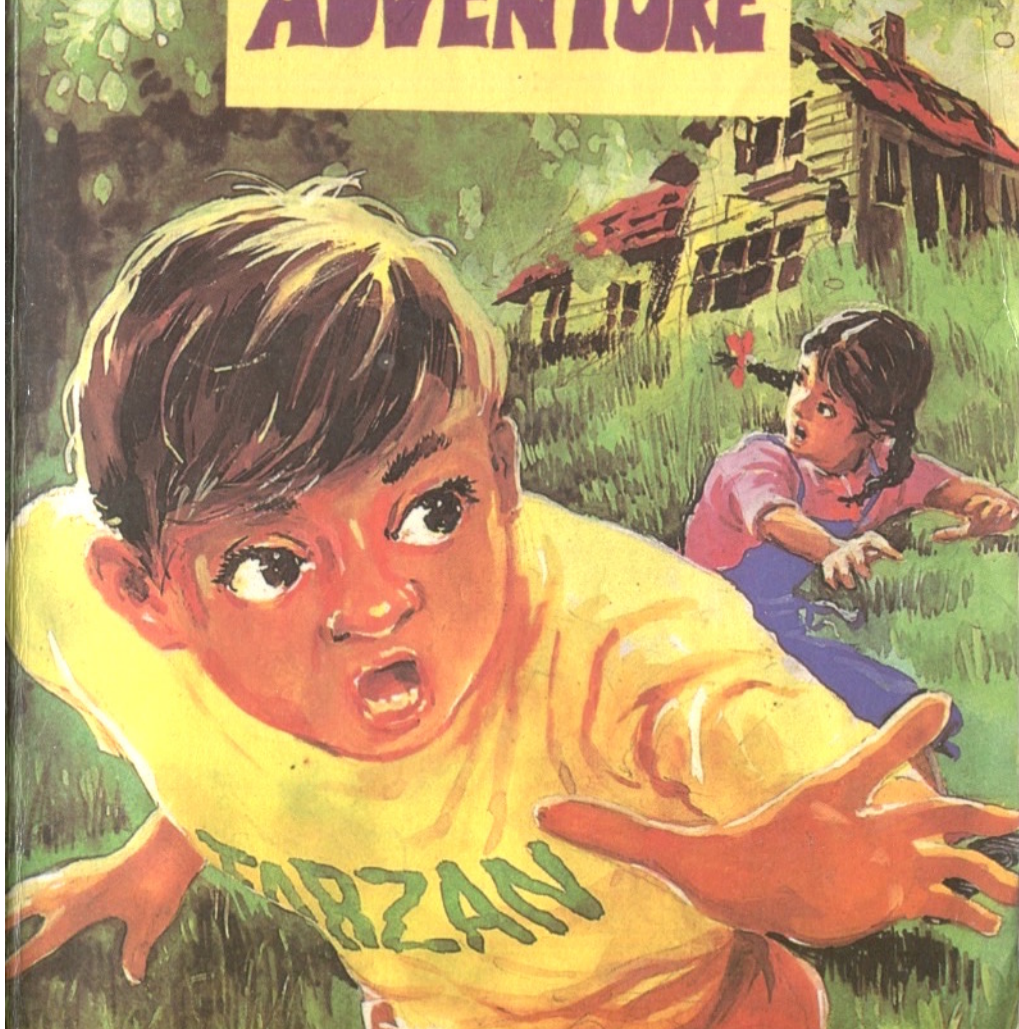


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Priti Banerjee

THE TWIN'S HOLIDAY ADVENTURE



THE TWIN'S HOLIDAY ADVENTURE

By Priti Banerjee
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Children's Book Trust, New Delhi

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Home for holidays

The train gave one loud, long whistle, and with a slow chug, the huge wheels started to roll. There were shouts of "Happy holidays", "See you next year" and "Merry Christmas". The twins waved goodbye to their friends, thrilled to be on their way home at last. It had been a long term and they were longing to see their parents again. They waved till the grey and white clad figures were no longer visible and then settled back in their seats and sighed contentedly.

Their friends would soon be boarding the School Special, while they themselves were speeding along towards home. They felt most important and grown-up to be travelling on their own, though, of course, good old Venky, the games master, had put them on the train. They would be met at Mettupalayam, where they would change for the hill railway for the rest of the trip home. So it was a short-lived independence really, but Dinesh and Sujata were determined to enjoy every moment of it. After all, they were almost twelve years old, and



were quite capable of looking after themselves and keeping an eye on their things.

The children gazed out of the window, thinking back happily of the good times they had had this term. Dinesh had almost made it to being captain of the cricket team. He had been terribly disappointed when Rajiv had been chosen in his place. Still, playing cricket had been tremendous fun, and Dinesh had been brought up to take disappointments in his stride. He could very well be captain next year, he mused. Old Venky had hinted as much. He closed his eyes and saw himself scoring run after run to the amazement and delight of the entire school.

Dinesh was shaken rather rudely out of his reverie by his sister's voice.

"Hey, Dinu, do you think Mum and Dad will like the Christmas presents we have bought for them?"

"I am sure they will," Dinesh replied. "After all, we spent a lot of time and care in selecting them."

The twins had been saving up their pocket money and had bought a bottle of moisturiser for their mother, because she always said she needed it in the cold climate of the Nilgiris. They had bought a set of handkerchiefs for their father, who was always losing his. It would be a quiet Christmas on the Glendale Tea Estate; the children were used to that. They quite enjoyed the Christmas lunch their parents always gave for the servants and their families. There would be small presents for the servants' children. It was such a pleasure to see the joy on their faces as they opened them.

The children mused over their various school activities as they sped along, gazing happily out of the window.

The train wheels made a steady rattling sound. The passing scenery was monotonous, but they were too pleased with life to be bored.

Dinesh was back on the cricket field again; he had just scored his first century and was well on the way to making another. Sujata was thinking of the pyjama party she and her dorm-mates had the night before. The girls had waited till they thought Matron was asleep and then quietly crept out of bed. They had bought some goodies from the school tuck shop—mostly things to munch on their journey home. Some of these they had kept aside for their midnight feast. There was much chattering and giggling and, inevitably, Matron awoke and descended on them, pretending to be very cross indeed. Actually Matron was a pet and could never stay cross for long. This time she did not even try hard. Suppressing a smile, she told them as sternly as she could that she wanted everyone back in bed and lights out in five minutes or else there would be trouble. The girls scurried back quickly and silence reigned in the dorm once more.

Sujata would miss her friends though she loved her home and the tea gardens, nestling in the beautiful Nilgiri Hills. And then there was Champ, their beautiful three-year-old Alsatian. The twins adored him and, not surprisingly, their feelings were fully reciprocated.

The train seemed to be slowing down and pulling up at some place that passed for a station. Day-dreaming came to an abrupt halt.

"I say, Sue," said Dinesh, "I am hungry." He looked out through the window eagerly.

"So am I," said Sujata. "Of course, we have got the sandwiches Matron packed for the way, although some

nice hot *vadas* (a South Indian savoury) or something like that would be super.”

“Here is a chap selling *vadas*,” said Dinesh.

The children got off the train. It was good to stretch their legs and look around for a bit. Some policemen had got off the train, too. The children wondered idly what they were there for. They bought their *vadas* and stood on the platform eating them, keeping a wary eye on the train all the while. As soon as it showed signs of moving on, they were back in their compartment. They settled down in their seats. There were a number of new faces in the compartment. Some of their earlier companions had got off.

The twins took out the sandwiches the school had packed for them and completed their little meal. It would be a while yet before the train reached Mettupalayam. They could indulge in a little day-dreaming followed perhaps by a wee nap. They relived the trip made with the school party. St. Stephen's and its sister school St. Martha's were situated in the Western Ghats. It was familiar tea-growing territory and the children loved its cool climate and scenic hills. The school buses had brought them down to Coimbatore from where the children went their various ways. There had been a great deal of laughing and singing on the way. One of the popular songs went this way:

*We are off on our vacation,
We are on our merry way.
We will soon be at the station,
So happy and so gay.
No more History for a while,
No more gym or prep.*



*No more marching by the mile,
'Look out, you are out of step.'
No more turnips, no more beans,
We have had enough of those.
No more 'Eat up all your greens',
Adding to our woes.*

The long winding hill journey had passed quickly enough, as journeys do when home is the destination. And now, the second lap was almost over.

Dinesh had dozed off in his seat. Sujata shook him awake. "We are almost there," she said, as the train slowed down to pull into Mettupalayam.

They peered out of the window. Oh, yes, there was old Subu, the *mali* (gardener), who had been sent down to escort them to Coonoor, where Daddy would meet them in the jeep. Subu had been on the gardens all his life and had a store of interesting information. He had stories to tell from the days of the Raj when the 'gora sahibs' or white masters were managing the tea estates, tales of adventure and intrigue. Fortunately, he spoke good Hindi, for although the twins had picked up a fair amount of Tamil, they were much more at home with English or Hindi.

"Subu," Dinesh called, as the train ground to a halt. Waving excitedly, the children jumped off the train while Subu, grinning widely and toothlessly, took charge of their luggage.

An exchange of bags

“Baba, Missy, is this all the luggage you have?” asked Subu, as he called a coolie.

“Yes,” said the children, looking around them happily and not paying the slightest attention to what Subu was asking them.

“All right, then, let us go. The hill train will be waiting for us.”

They walked down the platform to where the tiny little blue painted carriages stood waiting. The children loved riding on the hill railway. It was like a toy train almost, as it puffed its way up the hills. They settled into a compartment, with Subu fussing over them and their luggage.

“How are Mummy and Daddy? And how is Champ? Do you have any more nice stories to tell us? Has Cook made lots of cakes and fudge for Christmas?”

“Wait a minute,” Subu sighed. “How can I answer all your questions at once? Yes, Sahib and Memsahib are very well and so is Champ. You will have to wait and see for yourselves what Cook has made for you. All I know is that he and Memsahib have been very, very busy in the kitchen these last few days.”

Sujata and Dinesh looked at each other and grinned. They knew Mummy would have all sorts of goodies ready for them when they arrived.

The little hill train puffed and panted and made its way up the winding hillside. It was really a most picturesque and enjoyable ride, even though the going was slow. As they climbed the hills, the slopes were covered with blue-tinted eucalyptus trees which gave these hills their

name—Nilgiris, meaning 'Blue Mountains'. Nearer home, there would be thick pine groves and the air would be richly scented with a delightful pine fragrance.

There was a nip in the air already and Sujata looked around for her little blue and white air bag in which she had packed a thick woollen cardigan for the hill journey. There it was, on the luggage rack above. She rose and took down the bag. Unzipping it, she started to reach for the cardigan and got an enormous surprise. The things in the bag were not hers! In fact, it was not her bag at all. How on earth had this happened? She turned it upside down. All her things bore her initials on them. Those were the school regulations. There were no initials on the bag.

"What is the matter, Sue?" Dinesh had been watching her.

"This isn't my bag! I don't know whose it is, but it isn't mine. Oh, Dinu, what do I do now?"

"How funny! You had it under your seat uptil Mettu. I saw you put it there. This one is exactly like yours, Sue. Where did it come from?"

Subu looked at them, puzzled. Though he had not understood everything they were saying, it was obvious to him that Sujata's bag had accidentally been exchanged for an identical one.

"Missy, this bag was under your seat, with all your other things. I asked you before you got off the train if your luggage was in order," he said.

"I know, Subu, it is not your fault. I, too, thought it was mine. Somebody sitting next to me must have had an identical one and must have got off the train taking mine by mistake and leaving his behind."

"I will tell you what I will do, Missy. I will get off the train at the next station and check if the owner of this bag is on the train. If he is, then we will get your bag back and return this one."

"Oh, Subu, that is a good idea. There are not many people on this train, so it shouldn't be too difficult," said Dinesh.

Subu was as good as his word, but he had no luck at all. The owner of the bag appeared to have got off the train at Mettupalayam or even before, taking Sujata's bag with him. There did not seem to be any way of getting it back. There was nothing more anyone could do. Sujata took out a cardigan from her suitcase and put it on. She noticed Subu's worried look as she straightened up after pulling out her cardigan. "Don't worry, Subu. There was nothing valuable in it. And it really was my fault. I should have noticed that this wasn't my bag. I will tell Mummy and Daddy it was my fault."

The rest of the journey proceeded uneventfully. The children pestered Subu to tell them a story, and as usual the old man complied. This one had to do with an old English tea planter who had lived about ten kilometres away from their estate. The old man had received news that both his children had been killed in a road accident in England. He had gone into one of the outhouses with his shotgun and shot himself in the head. This had happened towards the end of the last century. The story went that every year on Christmas the doors and windows of the old outhouse rattled and wild animals in the surrounding forest set up a terrible howl. For, it was on this day that the planter had taken his own life. The children thought the story was extremely far-

fetched. All the same, they listened, enthralled.

"Doesn't anyone live there now?" asked Dinesh.

"No, baba, no one has lived there since this incident. The bungalow has been demolished and a creche for the tea-pickers' children built in its place. Only the outhouse remains. It was used to store building materials for some time, but has been abandoned now. No one really seems to bother about it."

Sujata shuddered. "Poor old man," she said. "It must have been such a lonely life in those days. We at least have the telephone and can move around in our cars. I suppose they got around on horseback those days. And it must have been dangerous too, moving out after dark, with wild dogs and elephants roaming the forest."

"Yes," said Dinesh. "Remember, there is much more habitation here now than there would have been then."

"I would love to see the place," said Sujata. "Maybe we could go there on Christmas and see if anything really happens. I bet you are pulling a fast one, Subu. What time of the day are the shots supposed to ring out?"

"At mid day, Missy, but please, please don't go there. Nobody does. Everyone knows the place is haunted. The local people will take a mile-long detour to avoid the outhouse. They say that if anyone is there when the shots ring out, they will be shot and killed."

"Subu, you can't really believe all this nonsense," said Dinesh. He did not believe in ghost stories at all. Even so he could not help a shiver running down his spine. "How is it we have never heard of this before? I mean, if it is so close to our place, the story ought to have got around."

"People don't like to talk about it. I don't either for

that matter. I don't know what made me tell you children about it now."

"Well, we won't talk about it, then," said Sujata who noticed that Subu was looking positively uncomfortable. He was normally not superstitious, though this time he really did seem to have believed the fantastic tale.

She was fond of the old man, who had been with them since they were babies. Much of their time in their early childhood had been spent out in the garden, watching Subu at work, asking him questions and listening to his stories. He would show them where the strawberries and rhubarb grew, and when they were ready for picking, they would help him pick them and take them into the kitchen. He always knew where the robins had built their nests and would lift up the children onto his high garden stool, the one he used for clipping the hedges, and let them peep into the nests and see the tiny eggs nestling there. He never let them touch the eggs, of course. He had had some kind of elementary education, and had never struck them as ignorant or foolish. Oh, well, even highly educated people can be superstitious sometimes, Sujata thought to herself, and with that she dismissed the tale from her mind.



Plans for vacation

The twins were speeding along merrily in the jeep, Sujata sitting in the front with Daddy, and Dinesh and Subu at the back. They had been chattering non-stop, telling Daddy all about their activities in school. Daddy had to listen very hard to keep track of what they were saying. There followed a stream of questions about home, about the servants and about Champ.

"We want to do a lot of exploring these holidays, Daddy," Sujata said. "After all, we are almost twelve now. You did say we were old enough to wander around on our own and it really is perfectly safe in this area."

"Yes, of course, up to a point. It is safe enough on and around the garden. You can do as much exploring as you like, maybe take a picnic lunch with you or something like that—as long as you are back well before dark. But Mummy has a study plan chalked out for you therefore you can only go once your lessons for the day are over."

"Fair enough," said Dinesh. "We do have holiday homework, so we might as well get on with it. We don't have to start right away, do we, Daddy? We can have a few days off before we start our lessons, can't we?"

"Yes, I daresay you can. And now, we are almost home. I am sure Mummy will be sitting out on the veranda waiting for you."

The children surveyed the familiar scenery around them. The hills were thick with pine trees. Every now and then the trees gave way to a tea plantation. There was a thick mist all around them which would lift every few minutes and let the sun shine through. It was cold

too, in the open jeep but it was a bracing cold and the children loved it.

Very soon the well-known landmarks of their own tea garden came into view. There was the post office and the elementary school to the right; a little further along the road they would come to the dispensary and the milk booth. The Assistant Manager's bungalow loomed into view, set amidst picturesque peach and plum orchards. A little rivulet ran down the hillside. This had always been one of the twins' favourite picnic spots. The road wound on uphill, turning sharply now. One more bend and their bungalow came into sight.

"Mummy, Mummy, we are home!" Sujata was jumping in her seat, hardly able to wait till the jeep drew up into the porch. The next few minutes were a medley of excited squeals, hugs and kisses with Champ adding to the commotion in no small way.

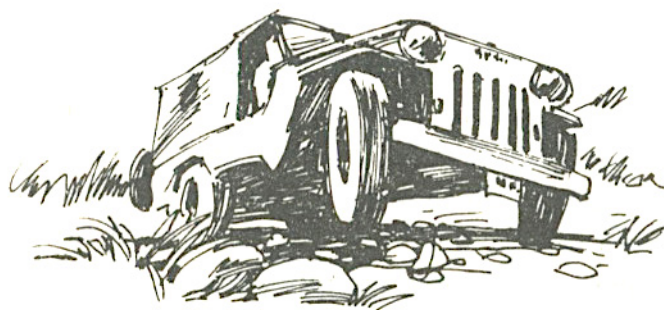
The children's luggage was taken in. After a wash, they went to greet Anthony, the cook, who was delighted to see them. They saw him laying out their tea and bounded into the dining room, ready to demolish the chocolate cake and *samosas* (triangular fried pastry stuffed with meat or vegetables) that had been made for them. They chatted about school and all their plans for the Christmas holidays. Mummy and Daddy listened, smiling. They finished their tea and then Mummy and took them into their rooms to unpack and settle down. Between them, the story of how Sujata's air bag got exchanged with someone else's came tumbling out. Mummy listened quietly.

"Mummy, it wasn't Subu's fault, really it wasn't," said Sujata, anxious that their friend should not be

blamed. She would much rather take the blame herself.

Mummy was quite calm about it. "You are lucky there was nothing of value in it," she said. "Do be more careful next time. I wonder what we are going to do with this one, though. Perhaps the servants can use some of these things. They are in fairly good condition."

The children finished their unpacking and settled down to see a film on video. Mummy and Daddy did not allow them to see films very often, but this was their first day at home, so rules were relaxed a bit. After dinner, they tumbled into bed, happy and exhausted. It was wonderful to be home and they were all set to have a lovely peaceful holiday. Little did they know that it was not going to be all that peaceful, after all.



The haunted house

The next few days were spent in and around the house. Dinesh and Sujata did their lessons for a while every morning, and then pottered around the garden or went for walks with Mummy and Champ. The weather was lovely, with bright sunny mornings, although by the time the sun went down it would be damp and chilly. The children knew they were lucky to have such good weather and they wanted to make the most of it. There was no telling when it would get misty and wet.

One lovely morning, the twins asked Mummy if they might take a picnic lunch and spend the day out. Mummy agreed, provided they put in an hour of study first. They sat down with their books obediently, but the truth was, their minds were far away. However, when the allotted hour was up, they hurriedly put away their books and ran to see what Mummy had packed for their picnic lunch. Their basket was ready, with mince, *parathas* (fried pancakes of unleavened bread) and apples. There was also a flask of fresh lime juice.

"We will take the local 'Cheran' bus from the main road," Dinesh told Mummy. "We will go as far as Karakkal, and then walk till we find a nice place to eat."

"All right," said Mummy. "Don't wander too far off the main road, and be sure to be back by about five in the evening, well before it gets dark."

"Right oh!" said the twins in unison, and with their picnic basket in hand, they were off. They caught the Cheran bus after a few minutes of waiting on the main road, and in about twenty minutes were at the village



of Karakkal, where they hopped off the bus. There were quite a number of people about, all busy shopping at the weekly market, or shandy as it was called. The twins knew this area well. There was a little path leading into the woods, just past the village. There was a small clearing in the woods, barely a few yards up the path. This was where they were heading now. Suddenly Dinesh stopped and stared.

“Sue, isn’t that Raju, one of our school-bearers?”

Sujata turned to look in the direction Dinesh was pointing. “Yes, I do believe it is. I know him because his wife, Shanti, works in the girls’ dorm. I wonder what he is doing here.”

“He belongs to the Nilgiris, I think.”

The man they were talking about saw them too and stopped in his tracks. He was tall and dark with bushy eyebrows and a slightly hooked nose. He came towards them.

“Raju, what are you doing here?” asked Dinesh.

“I have come to stay with my brother, baba,” answered Raju. “He lives on the Fairlight Tea Estate.”

The twins looked at one another. Fairlight! That was where the haunted house was, according to Subu’s story.

“How far is it from here?” asked Dinesh.

“Only a few miles, baba. I came up in the bus to do some shopping at the shandy.”

“Are you going back there now?” asked Dinesh.

“Yes.”

“Will you take us with you?” Dinesh enquired. “We have heard it is a very pretty place.”

A troubled look crossed Raju’s face. “Why do you want to go there? There is nothing special there.

Besides, it looks as if it might rain. I think you should go home now."

"Oh, no, we have only just come out," said Sujata impatiently. "Those are only a few clouds, Raju. It certainly isn't going to rain for some time yet. Come on, Dinu, do let us go. We can have our picnic there."

Dinesh agreed. He was as curious as Sujata to see the haunted house. Neither of them believed in ghost stories. All the same, Subu's story had caught their attention, possibly because it was set so close to home. They persuaded Raju to take them with him. He was, strangely, unwilling at first. Dinesh asked him if he had heard the story.

"Oh, yes, baba, everyone knows about the haunted house. People don't go anywhere near the place. The most terrible things happen there. Nobody ever goes there."

"If no one ever goes there, how do you know what happens? From what we have heard, nobody has been anywhere near the place for almost a hundred years," said Sujata.

"That is true, Missy, but stories like this one always have some truth in them. People believe what they have been told. This particular tale has been passed on from generation to generation for the last one hundred years. All the local people believe it. I myself do. Possibly someone has been near the place."

Dinesh and Sujata exchanged glances. They were more determined than ever to visit the haunted house. They said as much to Raju. The latter shrugged, "Don't say I didn't warn you. You will regret it."

Before long they were in the bus, on their way to a

village called Anikorai, which was the bus stop for the Fairlight Tea Estate. The village was a collection of small houses and a few shops. Raju got off the bus and the twins followed.

"This is where I am staying," said Raju, and without another word, turned and walked away.

The twins looked around. They would find themselves a place to eat; later they would look for the haunted house. Subu had said that the bungalow in which the planter had lived had given way to a creche for the workers' children. They had not passed a creche on their way to the village, so it must be further on.

Dinesh and Sujata started walking in the direction the bus had taken. The slopes on either side of them were covered with tea bushes. Some distance up the road, there was a little clearing to the right, slightly uphill. Here the children sat down and opened up their picnic basket. They were hungry and did justice to the lunch that had been packed for them. The lime juice they decided to keep for later on, when they felt thirsty. They packed the basket and stood up.

"I can see some buildings up there," said Sujata, pointing. "Look, you can get a glimpse of them between the trees."

"That must be it. Come on, let us go."

Munching their apples, the twins trudged up the hill, weaving their way through the tea bushes. Soon, a long, low building with a sloping roof came into view. When the twins were close enough, they saw a board which read "Creche for Fairlight Tea Estate".

"We are almost there," said Dinesh, excitedly. "Come on, the outhouse must be beyond that clump of trees."

In a moment or two, they could see an old, dilapidated building. It was little more than a shed. Its walls, once white, were now brown with age and neglect. Some broken glass remained in the windows. The front door was ajar, a heavy wooden frame, half off its hinges. There was thick grass growing all around it and a nondescript creeper made its way untidily up the wall to the right of building. There was a most ominous air about the place. By now it had grown cloudy and chilly, and the wind blew through the trees with a low, moaning sound. Sujata shivered, partly from the cold and partly because of the uneasiness which now surrounded them.

"Dinu, I don't like this place. Let us go home," she said.

"Don't be silly. What is there to be afraid of? Trust a girl to be scared of an empty, old outhouse!"

"I am not scared," said Sujata stoutly, and after that, she knew there could be no more talk of going home or else she would never hear the end of it.

The children walked up slowly to the front door, looking around them uneasily as they did so. Dinesh would never have admitted it, but a sense of foreboding had come over him, too. It was not that he was scared, he told himself firmly, it was just that the place had a certain forbidding air about it. However, having come so far, the children were not going to leave without taking a good look around.

The heavy door groaned loudly as they pushed it open. The room certainly looked as if it had not been entered for a hundred years. Thick dust lay all around. In a far corner, to the left, was a clutter of empty, broken crates. They must have once been packing cases for tea leaves.

Shattered glass lay here and there. The corners of the walls were covered with cobwebs. In spite of herself, Sujata shivered again. Dinesh walked over to the corner where the crates lay. A sudden rustling sound made both the children step back hastily.

"It is only rats," said Dinesh with a laugh that did not sound convincing. He peered over the crates again and suddenly frowned. "I say, Sue," he began, but stopped abruptly as the strangest sound came to their ears. The children moved closer instinctively. It started as a low wailing sound and then increased in volume. It was the unmistakable sound of a man crying as though his world had come to an end. The children huddled together. They were really frightened now. The crying continued, pathetic and heart-rending.

That was enough for Dinesh and Sujata. They fled out of the room and did not stop running till they had reached the main road.

They did not get a chance to talk over what had happened till after their dinner. They were sitting in Dinesh's room, while their parents were in the living room, watching television.

"The whole thing is weird, all right," Dinesh said. "That heart-broken crying we heard would be the old man crying for his children. I can't understand it. This sort of thing only happens in the most far-fetched ghost stories, and yet we heard it ourselves. What do you make of it?"

"I don't know," Sujata said slowly. "There are spirits, you know. I can't help but believe that the whole fantastic tale is true after all. I mean, we did hear the crying ourselves."

"Yes, but still...it doesn't ring true somehow. I don't know what to think."

"Well, let us not think about it any more. I am going to read a nice story book for a little while, to take my mind off this incident, and then I am going to sleep." Yawning, Sujata said good night and left. Dinesh flopped down on his bed and lay there thinking for some time. Finally, he too changed into his night clothes and switched off the light.



A trip to town

"Dinesh, Sujata, do you know who is coming to spend a holiday with us?" Mummy asked one morning, a few days after the twins' adventure at the haunted house. The mail had just come, and she looked up from the letter she was reading. Mummy looked pleased, so it must be someone nice.

"No, who?"

"Uncle Ranjit."

"Oh, super!" The children were really delighted. Uncle Ranjit was a great favourite.

"When is he coming? How long will he be staying?" Dinesh asked. He and Uncle Ranjit were the best of friends; what he felt for his uncle was nothing short of hero worship. Uncle Ranjit had all the time in the world for Dinesh and Sujata and the children adored him.

"He will be arriving tomorrow. I don't know how long he plans to stay. But I am sure he will spend Christmas with us. In any case, we won't let him go before that," Mummy smiled. "And now, if he is coming tomorrow, I am going to need to send to Coonoor for some things. Would you two like to go along for a drive?"

Needless to say, the twins were only too pleased at the thought of a trip into town. They rushed off to get ready while Mummy sat down and made her shopping list.

Soon they were speeding away towards Coonoor in the jeep, chatting merrily with the driver. Champ had come along for the drive and sat at the back with Sujata. He had been the first to jump into the jeep when he saw that the children were going out. Sujata put her arms

around his neck and her cheek on his soft fur. Champ wagged his tail happily.

The familiar tea gardens rolled by as did the villages that came on the way. Before long they were pulling into Lower Coonoor, which was the main shopping area. Mummy had given them some money and told them they could have a *dosa* (fried rice pancake) lunch in town while the driver took the shopping list and did her marketing. This prospect pleased the twins greatly and they were looking forward eagerly to crisp, crunchy *dosas* accompanied with coconut chutney and piping hot *sambar* (a curry of pulse, vegetables and spices).

"Shall we have something packed for you?" Dinesh asked the driver, as they got down from the jeep.

"No, thank you, baba," said the driver, taking out the shopping bags, "I ate before coming."

"Well, then, let us go. Champ, you stay here in the jeep, all right, boy? Stay." Champ was well trained and obedient, like most Alsatians. He knew what 'stay' meant, and laid himself on the floor of the jeep.

"Here, Champ," Sujata had brought along a few dog biscuits for him and these were received with much happiness. Champ wagged his tail as if to say, "Off you go. I shall be quite happy here till you return." So of they went.

They entered their favourite restaurant. It did not take long to place the order and once that was done, the twins settled down in their chairs and waited for the food to come.

"Oh, I am *so* pleased Uncle Ranjit is coming," said Sujata. "I hope he has some interesting cases to relate."

Uncle Ranjit was an Inspector of Police in Madras.

He had often enthralled the children with his narrative of cases he had solved, of wanted crooks who had been apprehended by the police. Dinesh was determined to join the police force when he grew up. He wanted to be like Uncle Ranjit.

“Remember the story about the blackmailer in a village outside Madras? He had dug up the shady past of two of the villagers and was using the information to extract large sums of money from them. The villagers thought there was some black magic involved, as they were convinced no one could have known their secrets except themselves. The blackmailer would have continued preying on their ignorance if it had not been for Uncle Ranjit and his men. And then there was the story in which the police dogs helped to bust a large international gang of smugglers. That is one of my favourites.”

The children reminisced about these and other stories they had heard. Dinesh had often tried to persuade Uncle Ranjit to write a book on the cases he and his colleagues had solved. Uncle Ranjit always laughed and promised to do so some day.

Reminiscing came to an end with the arrival of the *dosas*. They were as delicious as ever and the children were busy for the next few moments, Uncle Ranjit and his adventures temporarily forgotten.

Soon they were out again in the street, heading towards the jeep. Tyagaraj, the driver, was not back yet, so they would have to wait for a while. As they neared the jeep, they noticed with alarm that Champ was missing. This was really amazing. Champ had never disobeyed an order before. Where could he be? Had someone lured him away with an offer of food? But Champ was trained

not to accept food from strangers.

The children looked up and down the street. If he had gone into the main market, they would never be able to find him. Of course, Champ was intelligent enough to find his way back to the jeep. Perhaps there was no need to worry after all. Still, it was most unusual for him to wander off in this way. They decided finally to split and go in search of him.

Sujata went uphill, and Dinesh followed the road towards the taxi stand and the bus stop. The street was crowded as usual and it might not be so easy to spot Champ, specially if he had gone down one of the alleys leading off the main road. Dinesh decided to stop and ask the traffic policeman at the roundabout near the bus stop if he had seen a large brown and black Alsatian.

"Yes, I did," said the policeman. "He went that way." He pointed towards the bus stop. In a trice, Dinesh had reached the bus stop. He paused and whistled. He had to keep a wary eye out for buses coming in and leaving the bus stand. "Champ, Champ," he called and whistled again. This time he heard a low growl. Sure enough, there was Champ.

Dinesh was really surprised by what he saw. A man was leaning against a wall, almost pinned there by this large, fierce looking dog. Champ was growling angrily, and baring his teeth. The man was clutching something in his arms but Dinesh could not see what it was because it was wrapped up in a garment of some sort, perhaps the man's coat. The man looked really frightened. A few passers-by had stopped, and one or two of them tried to call off Champ, with no luck.

"Champ," Dinesh's voice was loud and firm. "Come

here at once. Come here, you naughty dog.” Champ, at first, seemed disinclined to obey. He looked towards Dinesh and then back at his quarry, without moving an inch. But when Dinesh called again, he moved away and slowly came to his side, rather reluctantly.

Before Dinesh could find out what had happened, the man hastily made his departure, still clutching his bundle to his chest. As he fled, Dinesh caught a glimpse of the bundle under the garment it was covered with. It seemed to be a blue and white air bag, something like Sujata’s!

Dinesh’s mind raced. Could it be Sujata’s bag? He tried to run after the man, but a bus was pulling out of the bus stand and he had to wait. By the time the bus had moved out, there was no sign of the man. There was quite a crowd at the bus stand, and the man was now completely hidden from view. He might even have got into one of the waiting buses. He had been so concerned with trying to call off Champ that he had not taken a good look at the man’s face.

Dinesh called Champ to heel and took him to the jeep. Sujata had returned and so had Tyagaraj. Briefly, Dinesh told them what had happened.

The shopping over, everyone got back into the jeep. Champ thought he was out of favour, so he wagged his tail tentatively, and licked the children’s hands, waiting for some response. They both patted him and said “Good boy” to show that he was forgiven. After all, if that really had been Sujata’s bag, then Champ had been very clever indeed.

Champ was overjoyed. He barked loudly and turned around several times inside the jeep before sitting down. Heads turned to look their way and people smiled at the

sight of the beautiful Alsatian. Now that he had made his peace with the children, Champ was content to lie down quietly on the floor of the jeep. Tyagaraj reversed the jeep and they started for home.

On the way, Sujata said, "Dinu, there must be so many air bags like mine. What makes you think this may have been mine?"

"Why else would Champ go after that man? He must have caught your scent from the bag. Don't you see?"

"Yes, you could be right." The children wondered for a moment why the man had behaved in such a furtive manner. But they soon forgot about the incident.



The visitor

"And so the lost child was returned to his parents, thanks to the police dogs." Uncle Ranjit finished relating one of his recent cases. Dinesh and Sujata lay on the carpet on their stomachs, their faces cupped between their hands. There was a lovely log fire blazing away cheerfully, for it was mid-December now and the minimum temperature was as low as 2°C. Mummy and Daddy too had been listening intently to Uncle Ranjit.

"Tell me, Ranjit," said Daddy, as he put another log of wood on the fire, "how did the dogs follow the child's scent across the river? I thought they lose the scent in water."

"Yes, they do," said Uncle Ranjit, "but in this case they followed the scent right up to the boathouse. We put two and two together and guessed the child must have crossed the river in a boat. As it turned out, we were right. Once we crossed the river, the dogs picked up the scent again."

"It must be marvellous to have such clever dogs," said Sujata.

"Well, it is mainly a question of training. Champ here could easily be trained to follow a scent." Champ thumped his tail on the carpet at the sound of his name. "In fact, the last time I was here, I had started to train him. He is an intelligent dog and he would have made an excellent tracker if I had had the time to complete his training." Champ looked as though he had understood every word that was being said about him and thumped his tail again.

"Actually," Dinesh said, "I think he is an excellent

tracker already. Remember how he went after that man yesterday in Coonoor, Sue?"

"Yes, I have been thinking about that. I am quite sure that was my bag the man was carrying. You see, it would have to be something familiar. I remember when you had started training Champ, Uncle Ranjit, you used my old rag doll for him to smell and then taught him to track me down from where I was hiding. He must have caught my scent from the bag and followed the man."

"Sue, Dinu, I don't know what you two are talking about. What bag? What man?" asked Uncle Ranjit.

Between the two of them, they told him how Sujata's air bag had got mixed up with an identical one on the train, and then went on to tell him about Champ's strange behaviour the previous day. Uncle Ranjit listened carefully. He was silent for a long time. The children asked him what he thought about it. He simply shook his head and smiled.

In a few moments, dinner was announced and the family trooped in to the dining room to settle down to one of Anthony's delicious meals. The aroma of crab curry and coconut rice soon made the whole family forget about dogs, tracking and air bags.

"*Didi* (elder sister), this is one of the most delicious meals I have ever had. If you keep serving up meals like this, I shall have to ask for a transfer to Coonoor, or some place here in the Nilgiris," said Uncle Ranjit.

"What fun, what fun!" the children chorused.

"Either that, or I shall simply kidnap Anthony and whisk him away before you know what is happening." He caught Anthony's eye while he was serving and the

two of them smiled at one another. Anthony always turned up trumps when Uncle Ranjit was visiting.

"Oh, we can't part with Anthony," said Dinesh firmly. "Uncle Ranjit, you had better get married. Then aunty can cook all your favourite food."

"That is a very good idea, Ranjit," said Daddy. "Although how you will get away from your sleuthing long enough to look for a wife is beyond me."

Uncle Ranjit's only reply was to wink at Sujata and Dinesh. Anthony brought in the dessert and everybody got down to the serious business of eating once again.

Later, gathered around the fire once more, Uncle Ranjit turned to the children and said, "Hey, you two, how about arranging a little fishing trip for me while I am here? Perhaps we could camp out somewhere for the night if your Mum and Dad agree." He turned towards his sister and brother-in-law with a questioning glance.

Mummy in turn looked at Daddy, who said, "I don't mind, if Ratna doesn't. There are some fine fishing spots, reservoirs with Forest or Electricity Board rest-houses. I can try and fix accommodation for you for the night."

"Oh, goody. Could we go to Upper Bhavani, Daddy? It is really pretty there, and there is plenty of trout and carp in the lake. They breed trout in the lake, don't they?" said Dinesh.

"Yes, they do. I will try and phone the rest-house tomorrow to book a couple of rooms."

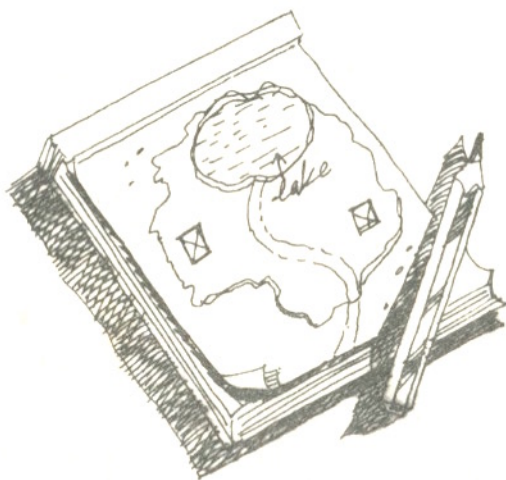
"It will be very cold in Upper Bhavani," said Mummy. "It is about 2,300 metres high. Take enough woollies, Ranjit."

"Right, and how do we get there?"

"I have a map. I will show you the route," said Daddy, getting up to take the map out from the bookshelf. Soon all five were poring over the large map spread out on the carpet, while Daddy traced the route with his finger.

"Here we are. You go down to Gandhipuram and turn sharp right and then up past Kundah and Korah Kundah. Here it is." They studied the map intently for a few moments.

Daddy said, "You can take the car, Ranjit. The road is a little rough in places, but you will make it." They spent a few more minutes making plans for the outing and then Mummy told the children it was time they went to bed. Dinesh and Sujata got up obediently and said good night to everyone. Then they went to their respective rooms, all set to dream happily about the forthcoming trip.



For company

"Sue, I have been thinking," said Dinesh the next morning as they sat out on the lawn. They had been talking to Subu who had promised to dig up plenty of worms for them to take along on their fishing trip. "You remember old Raju? It might be a good idea to take him along with us. He has done a lot of fishing in this area. I remember him telling us about it once in school. He belongs to the Nilgiris and I think he would be a great help on the trip. He is on holiday now as school is closed, so there shouldn't be any reason why he can't come. I am sure he would jump at it."

"Well, we had better ask Mummy and Daddy," Sujata said, doubtfully.

They asked their parents at lunch and Daddy agreed. "Since he is from your school, he is bound to be reliable. Yes, it would be useful to have a local person with you. Perhaps you could nip down to his village tomorrow and fix it up with him. I should have the confirmation from the rest-house by then."

The next morning, Daddy phoned from his office to tell the children that he had been able to get them a couple of rooms at the rest-house for Saturday night. They were delighted and ran to give Mummy and Uncle Ranjit the good news. Mummy smiled when she saw their happy faces.

"I will make something nice for you to take along," she said. "Ranjit, is your fishing tackle in order?"

"I think so," said Uncle Ranjit, "but there are one or two things to attend to in the car before we set out. I

will do that now." He rose and walked towards the garage.

"Let us go ask Raju if he can come with us," said Dinesh, jumping up. "We could go right now. May we, Mummy?"

"All right, but be sure to be back for lunch. It is half past ten now, so you have enough time."

A few minutes later, the twins were on their way. They caught a bus and were soon at the village. They had no idea where Raju stayed and decided to ask the shopkeeper at the village's main provision store. In a place this size, everyone would surely know everyone else! Sure enough, the shopkeeper nodded at the mention of Raju's name. He came out of the shop and gave the children directions, pointing as he did so.

It was not difficult to find the house and in a moment or two, they were knocking at the door of a small, neat house with whitewashed walls and green windows and doors. It was some time before the door was opened. A woman looked at them enquiringly. They told her who they were and asked for Raju. She shook her head and said something in Tamil. They caught the gist of what she was saying. Raju was not at home but would be back in about twenty minutes. Would they like to come in and wait? They looked at one another, wondering what to do.

"All right, we will wait. Thank you," said Dinesh, after a moment's hesitation.

The woman ushered them in. The room which they entered was small. It had two straight-backed chairs and a few mats rolled up and stacked against the wall. Through the open door, the children looked into what

must be the kitchen, with sparkling stainless steel vessels arranged neatly on shelves. Everything in the small house was spotlessly clean.

The woman motioned the twins to the chairs and disappeared into the kitchen, coming out a few minutes later with two steel tumblers of South Indian filtered coffee. The aroma was most appetising and the children accepted it gratefully. She stood there silently while they sipped their coffee. They would have liked to talk to her but their knowledge of Tamil was too limited for an extended conversation. They finished their coffee and handed the tumblers to her, thanking her again.

"I wonder how long we will have to wait," Sujata said. "There is no sign of Raju. Should we take a little walk and come back after some time?"

"I say, Sue, I know what. Let us go up to the haunted house. It won't take long. It will be quite exciting to look around the place again."

Sujata hesitated. In the excitement of Uncle Ranjit's arrival, she had almost forgotten their adventure at what they called the 'haunted house'. Now, reminded of it, she was not so sure she wanted to go there again.

"Oh, Dinu I wish you wouldn't. It...it is so scary. I know it is silly, but there really is something sinister about the place."

"You don't have to come if you don't want to," said Dinesh.

"Oh, I won't let you go alone," said Sujata loyally. "I will come with you." She paused for a moment, thinking. "I know what. I won't come inside. I will stand outside the door. That way, if anything does happen, you won't feel you are all alone. It will help to

know there is someone around, won't it?"

"Yes, it will. I have to admit I would rather have you there. Thanks, Sue, you are a sport."

The children told the woman they would soon be back and left. They arrived at their destination without any untoward incident. As they passed the creche where the manager's bungalow had once stood, they noticed a road leading up to it. It was almost completely covered with grass and weeds, which was why they had missed it the first time. They guessed it must lead to the main road from where they had just come. They had taken the short-cut up the hill through the tea bushes.

Dinesh and Sujata stopped in front of the outhouse. They looked around them expectantly. Somehow it seemed as though something strange, something unusual ought to happen. But nothing did. Everything was quiet and peaceful. A few stray dogs barked in the distance. Occasionally they could hear a car or a bus on the main road. There was a reassuring air of normalcy around the place. The children wondered why they had thought it sinister, to begin with. Surely these absurd ghost stories one heard from servants could not possibly have any truth in them. Or could they?



A strange experience

Dinesh had been inside quite a while now. In spite of telling herself she was being foolish and that there was nothing to be afraid of, Sujata could not get herself to go inside. She stood away from the door, looking around her and trying to think happy, cheerful thoughts. What on earth was Dinu up to and why was he taking so long? She called out to him but his only reply was an impatient "Hold on". Sujata sighed and started to hum a tune to make the time pass quickly.

Dinesh, in the meantime, was busy inside. After looking around warily for a minute or two, he moved towards the pile of crates in the corner. He remembered something he had seen the first time they had come here, something he had been about to tell Sujata when that awful crying had started and they had both got frightened and run. The crates had been moved recently and there had been fresh marks in the dust on the floor. That had struck him as strange, for, according to all reports, no one had been near the place for years. And yet, someone had been there, perhaps quite recently, and had moved the crates. Why?

Very carefully, Dinesh moved the pile of crates to one side, taking care not to topple them. He could now see a gap in the wooden floorboards. The boards next to the gap had obviously been tampered with; the nails were loose and must have been pulled out to remove the boards and then hastily put back again.

Why, Dinesh wondered, had the boards been removed? Was it to hide something underneath? The more he thought about it, the more convinced he was that he



had hit upon the answer. He bent low and tried to peer through the gap in the wooden floor. The space between the floor and the earth beneath was about eighteen inches or so. It was too dark for him to see anything. 'I wish I had brought a flashlight,' he thought. He straightened up and brushed the dust off his clothes.

Just then he heard Sujata call from outside the door. "Dinu, someone is coming this way."

Taking a quick look around to make sure no one had seen him, he carefully pulled the pile of crates back to its original position and stepped out to join Sujata. As he did so, Raju came into sight. He looked very angry.

"Why are you children here again? Don't you know it is dangerous to be here? Haven't I warned you?"

"Oh, Raju, there is really nothing to be..." Dinesh started to say. He stopped abruptly and the children almost jumped in alarm as the unmistakable sound of gunshots rang through the air. Raju grabbed them both by the arm, turned and started running down the hill, pulling them along with him. No one spoke a word till they were down on the main road once more. Out of danger now, they were able to stop and reflect on what had happened.

Raju turned to them again. "I hope you have learnt for yourselves that it is best for you to stay away. Goodness only knows what could happen if you go there again. My sister-in-law told me you had come here. I was worried that you might come to harm and came up to call you away. What were you two doing? Did you hear any strange sounds this time?"

"No, nothing at all, nothing till the shots rang out," said Sujata. "Oh, Raju, what does it mean? Who could

have been out there shooting? Were they trying to shoot at us?"

"No, I don't think so. I don't think there was anyone there at all. The place is haunted—you know that. If you persist in going there, you will come to grief. What was it you wanted to see me about?"

The children told him about their proposed fishing trip. "You are keen on fishing, aren't you?" Dinesh asked. Raju's face had lit up when he heard about the trip.

"Yes, baba, I would certainly like to come along. What time should I be at your place?"

"About nine o'clock on Saturday morning. We plan to leave around ten."

"I will be there." He walked on with the twins up to the bus stop, taking careful note of the directions to their house as they walked. Then, with a wave of his hand, he turned back.

Alone now, the children's thoughts turned back to their strange experience at the haunted house. What could it mean? They both remembered that in the original story that Subu had told them, gunshots were supposed to be heard at mid day on Christmas every year. There were still some days before Christmas, but it had been around mid day all right. Could the story have some truth in it after all? Dinesh and Sujata were silent for a while, both wondering what to make of the incident. Sujata kept thinking how fortunate it had been for them that Raju had happened to come along at that moment. She told herself she would have surely died of fright if they had been alone. Presently the familiar green Cheran bus loomed into view and the twins were homeward bound once more.

A fishing trip

Saturday morning dawned bright and clear. It promised to be a lovely day. Mummy and Anthony had been hard at work, and now a lovely lunch was packed and ready for them to eat on the way. There were goodies to take along, too. Daddy and Uncle Ranjit between them had checked the car over thoroughly. Daddy had put a bag of tools in the car in case they were needed. The fishing tackle had been duly packed, and now only the children's overnight case and Uncle Ranjit's bag remained to be put into the car. Champ had been busy, too—busy getting in everyone's way. He kept barking and running to and fro. He knew, of course, that the children were going somewhere, because he saw their case being packed and he knew what that meant.

"Oh, Champ, we are only going away for one night. We will soon be back, boy," said Sujata, patting him.

Champ looked up and wagged his tail hopefully. 'Take me with you,' he seemed to be saying.

"Daddy, can't we take Champ along with us? Please? We will look after him very well, really we will. Please, Daddy?" Sujata said, looking at her father entreatingly.

"Oh, yes, that is a lovely idea," said Dinesh. "We will take his bowl and his leash along, and may be his coat, too, because it is going to be colder in Upper Bhavani. Daddy, do please say he can come with us. It will be such fun."

Daddy looked at the earnest young faces and laughed. "He will chase away the fish, you know. You have to be very still and quiet while you are fishing. When was the last time you saw Champ sitting quietly?"

"I will keep him with me while the others are fishing," Sujata said quickly. "I will put him on his leash and go for a walk. I don't think I could sit still for a couple of hours either. Uncle Ranjit says we mustn't talk, and I think that would be rather boring. It would be nice to have someone who is not glued to his fishing rod!"

Uncle Ranjit grinned and pretended to cuff her ear. He knew she was referring to him.

Mummy and Daddy talked it over for a minute or two and then agreed to let Champ go.

"I will give you two extra bottles of milk. It is so cold now, the milk won't get bad," said Mummy. "You can give him bread and milk this evening, or see if the cook at the rest-house can make him some chapatis. Take his dog biscuits along, too."

The twins ran to get Champ's things together. Champ, meanwhile, was beside himself with delight. He barked loudly and jumped on everyone in sight. Once his things were in the car, he lay down on the back seat, content to wait, now that he knew he was being taken along.

Raju arrived in due course, and soon they were on their way. It was a three-and-a-half hour drive to Upper Bhavani and Uncle Ranjit kept them entertained with his jokes and anecdotes. After a while they all sang songs together while Raju, sitting at the back with Dinesh and Champ, looked on, amused.

The going was slow, because of the winding road. It was uphill most of the way. Singing soon gave to word-making games and before very long, it was time to stop for lunch.

It was not easy to find a place to stop and eat because

the slopes on either side were steep and covered with tea bushes. However, after driving on for a bit, they came into a valley, and selected a spot beside a plum orchard, with a little stream flowing by. Sujata took charge of opening the food basket and handing round plates, feeling very grown-up and important indeed. Silence reigned for a few minutes as everyone concentrated on eating.

"I say, Uncle Ranjit," Dinesh said after a while, "how about relating one of your recent cases? You haven't told us about any for simply ages."

"Have a heart, old chap," said Uncle Ranjit, laughing. "I want a bit of a break myself. I would like to forget all about being a policeman while I am on holiday."

"It is not fair," said Sujata. "We don't get a chance to forget about school while *we* are on holiday. Be a sport now—tell us a story, a really exciting one."

"A really exciting one," Uncle Ranjit repeated slowly as he reached for a paper napkin. "Well, the truth is, I have been on a case of missing diamonds for some time, but am no closer to arriving at the solution. My colleagues are working on it even now. Maybe after this little holiday, my brain would have cleared a bit and once I get back on the case again, all the missing pieces will fall into place."

"Tell us about it anyway. Where were the diamonds stolen from?" asked Dinesh.

"It is not really a case of stolen diamonds," said Uncle Ranjit. "The Customs in Madras received a tip-off that a certain businessman returning from abroad was trying to smuggle in a cache of diamonds. In spite of minute scrutiny at the airport, nothing was found. However,

the police have reason to believe that the diamonds were, in fact, in the businessman's possession. The Income Tax authorities were informed; a raid on his house revealed nothing. Obviously the diamonds have been spirited away somewhere. We have one or two leads all right, but till now no definite clue as to where they could be."

The children had been listening carefully. Suddenly Champ gave a low growl. He was lying next to Raju, who had taken his lunch and moved away a little.

"Quiet, boy!" said Dinesh and turned back to Uncle Ranjit. "You said you had some leads. What is your theory?" But Uncle Ranjit shook his head.

"Come on, you two. Let us start clearing up." They collected the plates and wrapped them in newspaper. Sujata closed the tiffin-carrier and everyone helped to carry the things back to the car.

The drive to Upper Bhavani proved to be an exceptionally pretty one. No one spoke much now, as they were all content to gaze out of the windows and admire the view. All, except Uncle Ranjit, of course, who had to keep his eyes on the road. There were one or two bad spots on the road, where the rainwater had collected and made it extremely slushy and difficult to drive. It seemed at one point that the car would get stuck, but they managed it all right and kept going. Uncle Ranjit had been consulting his route map from time to time and presently he said, "We ought to be able to see the lake now. Keep a look-out for it. We are almost there."

Sure enough, after a few more turns, they caught a glimpse of the lake, but it got hidden from view again as the road took another bend. In a few minutes, they

were pulling up in front of the rest-house at Upper Bhavani.

It was a pretty house with a well-kept garden. The caretaker was expecting them and was there to help them with unloading their things and to assign them their rooms. They had two rooms and, of course, the use of the sitting room and the dining room. There was no one else staying at the rest-house, so they had the place to themselves. There was a room near the kitchen, where Raju was told he could sleep for the night. It did not take long to settle the rooms and put all their things away. Very soon Uncle Ranjit and the twins were sitting around the dining table, sipping piping hot tea and munching some of the goodies Mummy had packed. Raju had made friends with Srinivasan, the cook and caretaker, and was having his tea in the kitchen.

"I wish we could have a fire," said Sujata, looking at the fireplace and trying to warm her hands around her mug of tea.

"We certainly can. But I thought we could go for a little walk first before it gets too cold and dark. I will ask Srinivasan to start the fire after about an hour, and we can then come back to a lovely blazing fire after our walk," said Uncle Ranjit.

"Oh, yes, let us," agreed the children. Champ pricked up his ears at the word 'walk' and wagged his tail.

"We will take you along, old chap," Uncle Ranjit patted him, "Dinu, if Raju has had his tea, we could start now." Dinesh went into the kitchen to call Raju.

The air was cold and bracing as the four of them, with Champ trotting along beside them, stepped out. They walked on silently for a while, taking in the

beautiful scenery around them. Presently the Bhavani river came into view. What they could see from here was the upper part of the river, from which 'Upper Bhavani' had got its name. The dam across the river was visible, too. The other side of the dam, and about 45 metres below, was 'Lower Bhavani'.

"Gosh, this place is really beautiful," said Sujata. She shivered slightly as she spoke and pulled up the zip of her anorak higher.

"Yes, it is lovely. I hope the fishing here is as lovely. That is what I am interested in," said Uncle Ranjit. He turned to Raju. "Which do you think would be the best spot for us to go fishing?"

"I would say somewhere there, Sahib," said Raju, pointing. "The sun will come out behind that hill there, so you would be facing the sun."

"Yes, we want our shadows to fall behind us," said Uncle Ranjit thoughtfully. "We will make an early start, around 6.30. Are you game?"

"Certainly, Sahib."

"But the river bank is steep. We will have a tough time climbing down to the water level," Dinesh pointed out.

"Yes, the water level is low at this time of the year. Anyway we will manage. I think those rocks there would be a good place to sit," said Uncle Ranjit.

"You folks can fish as much as you like. I will take Champ and go for a nice long walk early in the morning. It will be much warmer than sitting still," Sujata said.

"Sue is right, you know. It will be freezing so early in the morning. Sure you don't want to back out," Uncle Ranjit looked at Dinesh and grinned.

"Not on your life," came the emphatic reply.

A few minutes later, the four of them headed for the rest-house. They were silent most of the way, with Dinesh and Sujata kicking stones in front of them. Suddenly Sujata spoke up, "Dinu, we didn't tell Uncle Ranjit about our adventures at the haunted house. I wonder what he would make of the whole thing."

Dinesh frowned. He had not wanted anyone to know about their unusual experience, not even Uncle Ranjit. "Oh, that is all a lot of nonsense, you know that, Sue. Uncle Ranjit wouldn't be interested."

"Oh, but I *am* interested. I am always interested in anything you two do. You know that. Out with it, now. What is all this about a haunted house?"

Still kicking stones, Sujata slowly narrated their experiences. Dinesh joined in too, filling in details which Sujata had left out. He, too, was relieved in a way to share the story with a grown-up. The children had not talked about it much, but both of them had been decidedly unnerved by the whole thing. Uncle Ranjit listened carefully, taking in every little point and asking a question now and then. Soon all the facts had been placed before him. He seemed to be studying the ground intently. No one spoke for some time. Suddenly, Uncle Ranjit took his hands out of his pockets and rubbing them together, turned to Raju.

"Raju, would you mind walking on ahead and getting the fire lit in the living room? It is turning really cold now."

"No, Sahib," Raju quickened his pace and was soon around a bend in the forest and out of sight.

"Dinu, Sue, after your first visit to the haunted house, did you tell Raju what had happened?"



"No," the children spoke together.

"Well then, the next time you went there, what made him say 'Did you hear any strange sounds *this time*?' Are you sure that is what he said? Did he use the words 'this time'? Think carefully, this may be important."

The children looked at each other. The incident was still very vivid in their memories. Dinesh was the first to speak. "Yes, that is what he said." Sujata nodded in agreement. "But how did he know? We didn't tell anyone what had happened. How could he have known we had heard anything at all? Unless he was somewhere around at the time."

"Yes. That is exactly what crossed my mind. He knew the two of you were going up there. He could have followed you, possibly to see you came to no harm. Or maybe there is more to this whole thing than meets the eye."

"What do you mean?" asked Sujata.

Uncle Ranjit shook his head and the twins could not get another word out of him till they reached the rest-house.



In the mist

“Come on, children, let us take a photograph or two before the light fails. Call Raju and bring Champ along, too. This is a lovely place for a photograph.”

The little group was soon assembled and Uncle Ranjit took three photographs, all at different angles and varied settings. It was almost dark now, and they moved into the living room where the fire was blazing cheerfully. The rest of the evening was spent exchanging jokes and anecdotes.

The cook served them dinner in front of the fire. Shortly after that, the twins, tired after their long, exciting day and wanting to be fresh for an early start the next morning, said good night and before very long, were fast asleep.

Much, much later, Sujata had no idea what time it was, she thought she heard sounds in Uncle Ranjit's room. There was a clicking noise, something like a cigarette lighter being flicked on and off. The light was on. Sujata was too sleepy to wonder what might be going on and drifted into sleep again. A little later, half asleep, she thought she heard the soft crunching sound of wheels moving on gravel. ‘I am really imagining things,’ she thought. She turned over and in a moment was dead to the world.

Unknown to Sujata, someone else had heard the sounds in Uncle Ranjit's room and also the sound of the wheels. The engine had not been turned on as there was a slight downward slope leading away from the rest-house. The car made very little noise, but the man who heard it knew he was not imagining things.

Early next morning, the two men and Dinesh set out with their fishing tackle to take their positions beside the Upper Bhavani river. It was still slightly dark and an icy wind was blowing. The three had to stamp their feet and blow on their hands to keep warm. Sujata had promised to bring them a flask of hot coffee after an hour or so. It was tricky going down the steep river bank to the water level. The ground was slippery with dew. With one or two near tumbles, the little party made its way down to the water.

Somewhat warmed after the walk, each one settled down in his place. They threw their lines into the water and waited for a bite. Raju's rod was merely a stick with a string tied to it and a home-made float. He had picked up a little dough from the kitchen and with this simple equipment, he was, surprisingly, the first to catch a fish. It was a carp, about eight inches long. Uncle Ranjit and Dinesh were using the worms that Subu had dug up for them. Soon Uncle Ranjit caught a fish, too. Dinesh had a bite, but he was not quick enough and the fish got away.

A little later, Raju said softly, "Sahib, there are too many of us covering a small area. Besides, the sun will be moving and you and I will have to change our positions. Let baba stay where he is. I will take you to a better place—just beyond those rocks there." He pointed as he spoke:

"All right, if you think that would be better."

The two of them got up and, with Raju leading, scrambled across the rocks and towards the spot that he had indicated. It was not easy going, and several times it seemed one or the other of them would slip

and fall into the water. From time to time they had to put their hands on the ground to steady themselves. Dinesh watched, tense, wondering if they would make it or if one or both of them would fall into the river. Of course, he knew they could both swim, all the same, a dunking in the icy water was not a pleasant notion at all. Soon they were hidden by the rocks and Dinesh could see them no more. Too late he realised he had missed another bite!

A thick mist had settled on them now. Dinesh could no longer see the float and had to concentrate hard to feel the little tug on the line when a fish went for a bait. Sujata should be coming now, Dinesh thought. He hoped she would not attempt the steep and tricky climb down. He decided he would call out to her as soon as he saw her and tell her to wait; he would go up for the coffee and then they would go in search of Raju and Uncle Ranjit. He hoped fervently that the mist would lift by then.

Uncle Ranjit, in the meanwhile, was still following Raju over the rocks, wishing himself back at their original place—fish or no fish. Raju was like a mountain goat, sure-footed and swift and was much ahead of Uncle Ranjit.

“We are almost there, Sahib,” Raju called out reassuringly.

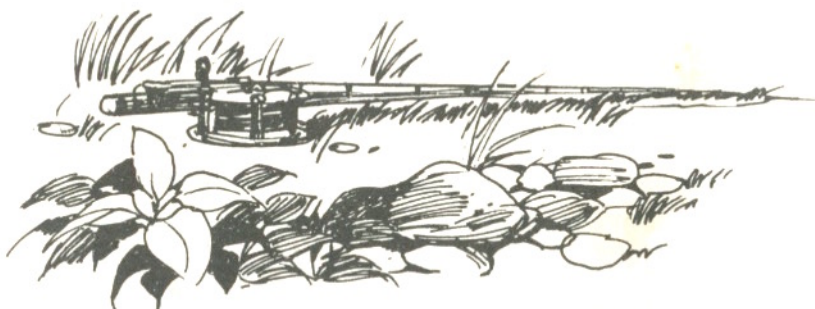
“You wait till I catch up with you. I will have your hide for this.” Raju laughed. He was completely hidden by the mist now and Uncle Ranjit had to follow in the direction of his voice. “Almost there, it seems,” he grumbled, nearly losing his foothold yet again.

Suddenly there was silence and he did not know which

way to go. He called out to Raju but there was no reply. The mist was so thick, he could not see more than about three metres ahead of him. His sense of direction told him which way to go, but he wished Raju would reply. Why was he silent? Had he slipped and fallen? Surely he would have heard him fall. Uncle Ranjit stood still. He thought he would go down to the water now and cast his line. The mist could lift any moment, he thought, and Raju's mysterious disappearance would probably be explained once the visibility improved.

Uncle Ranjit straightened up and surveyed the scene around him, as far as the mist allowed. Yes, this was as good a place as any to take up his position. He could not see the sun, but guessed they would still be facing it. He would also be able to see Sujata when she came with the coffee. Like Dinesh, he too did not want her to risk the steep descent. Either he or Raju would go up for it; Raju, preferably, if the man could be found!

Where on earth could he be? A sudden noise behind him startled him, but before he could turn around, something sharp and heavy hit him on the head and he knew nothing more.



The search

"We will have to go to the police," Sujata said with tears in her eyes.

"Yes, I think so, too," Dinesh nodded. The children were in despair. They had hunted for Uncle Ranjit everywhere. If he had fallen into the river, Dinesh reasoned, he would have heard the splash. He had heard him talking to Raju, even after the rocks had hidden them from his sight. He knew the spot for which they were headed was not far from where he had been sitting. How then could both men have disappeared into thin air?

The children wound their way up the steep river bank back to the forest path. Going up was easier than coming down. They ran back to the rest-house and, panting for breath, darted to the kitchen to get help from the cook and the watchman. Both men reacted quickly.

"We will all go down together and help search for them. After that, if there is no trace of them, we will take you with us to the police station in the village to report the matter and give a description of the missing men," said Srinivasan.

"Yes, let us do that. We will take Champ with us. If we take something of Uncle Ranjit's with us for him to smell, he may be able to pick up the trail. Wait, I will get something." Dinesh left the room and was back a moment later with a handkerchief of Uncle Ranjit's.

They set off, Selvaraj, the watchman, leading the way down to the dam. "We can get some help from the power-house," he explained. The walk through the forest would have been enjoyable at any other time. Under the circumstances, though, the group was worried and

serious, and they walked in total silence, broken only by an occasional sniff from Sujata. Champ too seemed to sense that some trouble was afoot.

The men on duty at the power-house left their work to listen to the account of the missing men.

"One of us will have to stay here to man the power-house," spoke up a man who seemed to be in charge. "The other two can come with you. I suggest we split up into two search parties. You children, with one of the men, take the dog and start at the point where you last saw them. The rest of us can go down the river. If they fell into the river, the bodies would be washed ashore, and some of the local fishermen who are out fishing at this time may have seen something."

The children shuddered involuntarily at the mention of 'bodies' but they knew they had to be practical. "Uncle Ranjit is an expert swimmer," said Sujata as they walked upstream to the place where Dinesh and the two men had been fishing. "I can't believe he could have been drowned. There is not much of a current."

"I know, but what other explanation could there be? The strange thing is I didn't hear the sound of anyone falling in the water, and neither of them cried out or anything like that. I could hear them talking and suddenly there was silence."

"Let us see if Champ here can solve the mystery. What a good thing Uncle Ranjit started to train him to follow a trail."

"Here is where Uncle Ranjit was sitting. Raju was there," Dinesh said, pointing. "Come on, Champ find, boy, find." He held the handkerchief under Champ's nose.

For a moment Champ did not seem to know what was expected of him. The children watched with bated breath. And then, to their enormous relief, he put his nose to the ground and after that there was no stopping him. The children and Selvaraj, who had come with them, had a hard time keeping up with him. Too late, Dinesh realised he should have put him on a leash. They scrambled after him as fast as they could. Fortunately by now the sun was out and the rocks which had been wet and slippery early in the morning were dry.

Over the rocks they went, Champ's nose still glued to the ground. "Wait, boy, not so fast," Dinesh called out, panting. Champ bounded on. The little group followed, excited. The trail seemed to be leading away from the river bank and into the forest. But no, Champ turned towards the river once again and stopped.

"Don't stop now, Champ. Keep going, boy," Dinesh said encouragingly but Champ just stood there, puzzled. Several times he bent his nose to the ground; clearly he had lost the trail there.

"Oh, no, no!" Sujata wailed.

"I suppose this means he did go into the water after all," said Dinesh. "We had better join the others. Perhaps they have some news by now."

"Wait a minute, baba," Selvaraj said. "I think I know why the dog has lost the trail. You see how the land juts out into the water here. It is quite possible the waves would have lapped ashore and washed away the scent. Look, here comes another wave now."

"You may be right. Let us go on for a bit and see if Champ can pick up the trail again," Dinesh said.

As it turned out, Selvaraj was right. A little distance

away, Champ picked up the trail again. This time it did lead away from the water and on to the grassy bank. The children were relieved to get away from the rocks at last. It was much easier going now. Champ scampered on, hot on the scent.

Soon the grassy slope gave way to clumps of bushes and before they knew it, they were in the heart of the forest. Deeper into the forest they went. The children were much more hopeful now. If Uncle Ranjit had gone into the forest, for whatever reason he may have had, there was a much better chance of finding him safe and unhurt than if he had fallen into the river. Champ was almost sidetracked by a rabbit at one point, but the children's calls were so insistent, he thought better of it and came back to the trail. And then he stopped abruptly and barked.

"What is it, Champ? Keep going, boy," Dinesh commanded. But Champ would not move. He stood where he was and barked again. Sujata was the first to hear a slight rustling in the bushes. Everyone moved to where the sound came from but they could see nothing. Now there was an audible groan. There was no mistaking it. Selvaraj picked up a stick and prodded among the bushes. To their astonishment, the bushes just moved away. And then it was clear what had happened. A tree had fallen on the ground; and concealed, partly by the foliage of the tree, and partly by the pile of leaves that had been placed there, was a human form.

All three pushed aside the leaves, and there before them, gagged and bound, was Uncle Ranjit! Selvaraj whipped out a pocket knife and cut the cords that tied his hands and feet, while Sujata fumbled with the knot

of the cloth that was tied around his mouth. Typically, the first thing Uncle Ranjit did on being free was to wink at the children.

"Oh, praise God, you are safe, you are safe!" Sujata threw her arms around his neck and sobbed openly. Uncle Ranjit hugged her and held out his hand to Dinesh, whose eyes were moist, too. He knew how much the children cared for him.

"Children, I can't thank you enough for finding me," he said, as he rubbed his sore ankles and wrists, "or perhaps it is really Champ here who deserves the credit."

"It is, it is . Good boy, Champ. Well done." The children patted Champ.

"And now, suppose you tell us what this is all about," said Dinesh. "What on earth happened? Who did this to you and why? And where is Raju? Goodness, we were scared stiff!"

"Children, explanations will have to wait, I am afraid. Selvaraj, can you help me get to the village as soon as possible? It really is important."

"But where is Raju?" asked Sujata.

"You will find out soon enough."

"You can't go off like this. What is happening? You can't just leave us and rush off. Where are you going? You haven't told us anything," cried the children.

"I know, I know. I am sorry. I will explain it all in due course, I promise. Right now it is of utmost importance that I get to the village without any delay."

"We will go down to the power-house, Sahib. There is a bicycle there you could borrow."

"Right. Let us go. Children, please listen carefully. I want you to go back to the rest-house. Have something

to eat and then pack up all our belongings. Here is some money; pay up our bill. Have you got that? Good. I will send a policeman from the village to drive you home. No, no questions at this point, please. The man will have a note from me so you will know I have sent him.

“Go straight home. I will be back as soon as I have finished what I have to do. I assure you everything will be all right. And another important thing—don’t tell anyone, anyone at all, other than your parents, that is, about what happened this morning. If the servants or anyone else asks where I am, say you don’t know. Say I have disappeared, and you simply don’t know where I am. I will be back soon, so you won’t have to keep up the deception very long. Ah, here we are.”

They had reached the power-house by the time Uncle Ranjit had finished speaking. The man on duty was astonished to see him and his gaze went to the lump on the side of his head. “What happened, Sahib? Did you have an accident?”

“Yes, you could say that. Now, listen. I need your help, please. I must borrow your bicycle to go down to the village. I will have it sent up to you. Here is something for your trouble.” A currency note changed hands and the bicycle was brought out.

Uncle Ranjit turned to Selvaraj and handed him some money, too. “This is for you and the cook, please share it with the men who have been out hunting for me. Thank you all very much.” With a wave to the children, Uncle Ranjit was off.

“Phew, we are on our own now. I wonder what is going on. It really is most mysterious,” Sujata said

as they watched the figure on the bicycle disappear around a bend.

"I guess Uncle Ranjit is on to some clue or the other in connection with one of his cases. I heard him say once that a policeman is never really on holiday. Although what clue he could have found on a quiet fishing weekend beats me," remarked Dinesh.

"I wonder what has happened to Raju. Uncle Ranjit said we would find out in due course," said Sujata.

Dinesh shrugged. "Let us do what he told us to, now. Come on, Sue, back to the rest-house. Selvaraj, will you please find the others and inform them the search is over. And then come back to the rest-house, please, so we can settle our bill."

The children turned and headed back to the rest-house. They followed Uncle Ranjit's instructions carefully. The driver from the police station, a constable, arrived as Uncle Ranjit had promised. After a hearty breakfast, which the cook prepared while they packed, they got their things into the car and started for home. What would the rest of the day have in store for them, they wondered. Would the mystery concerning the events of the morning be solved?



A shot in the dark

Mummy and Daddy listened, enthralled, to the tale the children had to tell. Neither of them could make anything of it at all. They talked about it for a while and then Daddy said thoughtfully, "I could be wrong, but I have a feeling it has something to do with a case of missing diamonds that Ranjit was on before he came here. He told me once that the diamonds had been traced as far as the Nilgiris. I wouldn't be at all surprised if he took his leave and came here for the express purpose of nosing something out."

The children listened with growing excitement. "He told us about the missing diamonds but he didn't say anything about them being traced to the Nilgiris. He only said something about the police having some clues. You mean the diamonds are somewhere here? How exciting!" Dinesh said.

"Well, the Nilgiris is a large area, don't forget. And as I said, I could be completely wrong."

A little later, in Sujata's room, the children talked about what Daddy had said. "You know," said Sujata, "somehow I think Daddy has hit upon the truth. Uncle Ranjit would never have hinted that he was still working on the case unless it was very much on his mind and he thought he may have something definite to go on."

"Ummm hmmm," said Dinesh. There was a long silence. Both children were thinking hard. Finally Dinesh spoke, "There are two things I find puzzling. You know, Sue, when we were packing up to leave, I saw Uncle Ranjit's camera lying on his bedside table. I don't know what made me open it. I had no reason to,

really, but I did, and do you know, the film was missing! I hunted for it everywhere. In any case, since I was packing his things, I would have found it if it had been anywhere in the room. It wasn't in the pocket of the trousers he wore yesterday either. What do you suppose could have happened to it? Why would he have taken it out of the camera? It was a new film and had plenty of exposures left."

"I don't know, but what could it possibly have to do with this whole thing? What connection could there be?"

"Well, it is strange, that is all."

"You said there were two things you found puzzling."

"Oh, yes. The other thing is that when we got into the car this morning, I noticed the keys were in the ignition. I know we took them out when we arrived at Upper Bhavani yesterday, because Uncle Ranjit asked me to hang them up on a nail in the living room so we wouldn't lose them."

"Yes, I saw you do that. Oh, oh..." Sujata stopped and her hand flew to her mouth. "Dinu, I *heard* the car last night. I was only half awake so I thought I must be imagining it. But...you say the key was in the ignition so he must have gone out somewhere in the car. I heard some clicking sounds in his room, something like a cigarette lighter being flicked on and off, and then I heard the car. So I wasn't imagining it after all."

"You say you heard a clicking noise like a cigarette lighter. But Uncle Ranjit doesn't smoke. And then you heard the car. Are you sure?"

"Well, I told you, I thought I was dreaming."

"No, I don't think you were dreaming. It ties up with the keys. Sue, think hard. What on earth could he have

tumbled on to in Upper Bhavani of all places? And who could have hit him and tied him up? Where was Raju when it happened? Where is he now?"

"Raju...yes, why couldn't Raju have helped Uncle Ranjit? He could have cried out or called to you. Either he was knocked unconscious too, or..." she stopped and the children looked at one another. They knew they were both thinking alike.

Dinesh spoke slowly, "Or he was the one who did it!"

"If that is the case, then he is the one Uncle Ranjit is after right now. But is he connected with the case of the missing diamonds? Did he say or do anything that made Uncle Ranjit suspect him?"

"And what is more, Sue, what made Raju realise that Uncle Ranjit suspected him? Because that must be why he tried to lure him away and then hit him on the head and tied him up. To keep Uncle Ranjit from catching him at whatever his game is."

"Yes, but he didn't reckon with Champ."

"Hmmm."

No one spoke for some time. Finally Dinesh said, "I think Uncle Ranjit took those photographs last evening because he wanted Raju's picture. If he had wanted ours and of the place, why didn't he wait till this morning? The light would have been much better and he would have got some lovely pictures by the river. I mean, the rest-house is pretty enough but there was no real view to speak of. Added to that, the light was bad. No, I think he was suspicious of Raju and maybe he wanted to get his pictures and check them out later with the police files on known criminals."

Sujata stared at him as he spoke. Then she said, "Dinu,

Dinu, don't you see? *That* is where he must have gone last night! He must have taken the film to the police station. The clicking sound I heard must have been him taking the film out of the camera. Perhaps they developed it at the police station and checked the pictures with their files, as you say."

"No, the files would be at their headquarters. But there is something in what you say, all right. That would certainly explain the missing film. Yes, Sue, I think you have hit the nail on the head."

"But Dinu, Raju *can't* be a crook. I rather like him."

"Crooks have been known to be likeable people before."

"I suppose so. Oh, but he is from your school!"

"He has only been there about two years. He could have been anywhere before that. People change their names, you know, and take on new identities."

"Yes, of course. I wonder what made Uncle Ranjit suspect him. It sounds fantastic, I know, but do you suppose it could be connected with the haunted house in any way?"

"Oh, no, surely not. Why, what made you say that?"

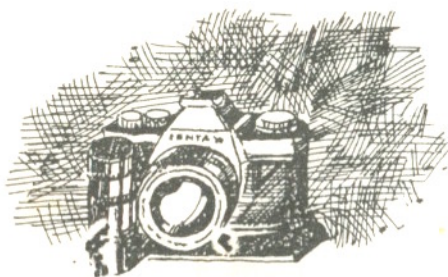
"Well..." Sujata hesitated, "it was immediately after we told Uncle Ranjit the story that he decided to take the pictures. And he sent Raju on ahead so that he could ask us questions. He said something about there being more to the whole thing than meets the eye."

There was a long pause. Dinesh was sitting bolt upright on the bed.

"Sue, Sue, you are a genius, I do believe. But wait a minute. There are a lot of loose ends that need to be tied up. Oh, you have started me on a completely new

train of thought. I must think. I will take a walk outside to clear my mind." Saying this, he left the room. He looked excited.

Sujata gazed after him in surprise. What she had said had been a shot in the dark. Of course, it had sounded reasonable enough and after all, everything seemed to have happened after the tale had unfolded itself. It had also struck her as significant that, as Uncle Ranjit had pointed out, Raju had been aware of their first experience at the haunted house. They had never told anyone about it, so how had he known? What did it all mean? She had to confess she was completely baffled. She had no idea what line Dinesh's mind was taking. Oh, well, he would tell her soon enough.



The drama unfolds

Dinesh did tell her, though not till after lunch. The twins were out in the garden. It was a warm, sunny afternoon. Sujata took her storybook out to read and Dinesh sat with his guitar strumming absently. He stopped abruptly and turned to Sujata.

"Sue, I think I have it worked out." Sujata put down her book. She had been longing to ask him, but had decided to wait till he told her himself. "Do you remember I told you I had noticed that the floorboards in the haunted house had been tampered with? I suspected at the time that they may have been removed to hide something under the wooden floor. You see, no one would ever go there because of the story about the place being haunted..."

"No one except us, that is."

"Yes, exactly. So as long as we were kept away, it was a safe hiding place. That is why Raju was so angry every time he saw us there."

"A hiding place for what? Oh, oh, Dinu, for the *diamonds!*"

"That is right. You know, the more I think about it, the more convinced I am that I am right. It explains Raju's annoyance; it wasn't our safety he was worried about, he was afraid we may find his hiding place."

"Yes, it all fits in. It is fantastic; you may be right. Oh, Dinu, how exciting! I can hardly wait till Uncle Ranjit gets back to find out the truth. I wonder what is happening right now."

"Well, I will tell you something. I am not going to wait till he gets back. I am going out there now."

"Dinu, you can't. It could be dangerous."

"Oh, I will be careful. You see, we don't know how much Uncle Ranjit really knows. After all, he has never been there before. We have. We know where Raju lives and where the haunted house is. We know the area. I could be a great help to Uncle Ranjit."

"If Raju sees you, there is no telling what could happen. He could even shoot you."

"He won't see me."

In vain Sujata begged him not to go. "I will tell Mummy and Daddy," she said.

"You won't find them. Daddy is attending a planters' meeting and Mummy has gone into town to do her Christmas shopping. She is going to bake the Christmas cakes tomorrow, you know."

"Dinu, I am scared."

"I promise I will be careful." He got up to go indoors.

Sujata returned to her book although it was hard to keep her mind on it. Subu came up to her presently. She looked up.

"Subu, what are you doing today?"

"I am trimming the hedges, Missy. You asked me to tell you when I did."

"Oh, yes. May I do a bit?"

"All right."

Sujata got up and took the secateurs from Subu. He held the stool while she scrambled on to it and started trimming the lovely azalea hedge. It was hard work and she was not very good at it. Subu let her carry on although he knew he would have to go over it again. After a few minutes he said, "I heard you and baba talking just now. Although I don't know much English,

I thought I heard baba say he was going to the haunted house.”

Sujata sighed. If Subu had heard, there was no point in denying it. “Yes, Subu. I tried my best to stop him, but he is determined to go.”

“I know. I heard all that. What is this about diamonds? And who is Raju? What does Ranjit Sahib have to do with it?”

Sujata hesitated. She was most reluctant to tell Subu the whole story. But he had, after all, overheard part of it, anyway. Very briefly, she gave him an outline of the sequence of events, ending with Uncle Ranjit’s disappearance. She remembered that Uncle Ranjit had instructed them not to say anything about his whereabouts. Not that they knew where he was, she thought. At best, it was just a guess that he may have gone to the haunted house.

Subu listened and then shook his head. “Why did you ever get yourselves involved by visiting the place? I wish I had never told you the story. If anything happens to baba...” He shook his head again.

* * *

Uncle Ranjit was not enjoying himself at all. His head still ached where the blow had landed. His wrists and ankles were sore and chafed. He had spent almost three hours in that position, hardly daring to move, and his joints were stiff. After his abrupt departure from Upper Bhavani, he had ridden the bicycle straight to the police station in the village, a distance of about four kilometres. He always carried his police identity card with him. This was checked by the constable on duty.

After proving his identity, Uncle Ranjit was allowed to talk on the Radio Transmitter to his colleagues at the Police Headquarters in Madras. He told them he was hot on the trail of the missing diamonds and needed some help in catching the crooks. Two of the constables from the village were assigned to help him. The three had arrived at Anikorai by mid afternoon. Uncle Ranjit had gone straight up to the haunted house, which he found easily from the description the children had given him. He hid among bushes behind it.

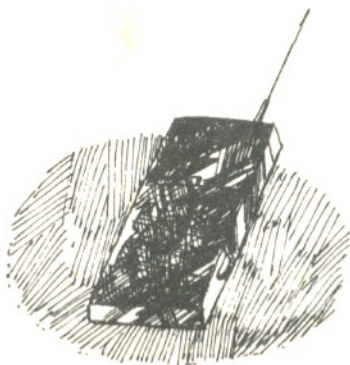
By this time, Uncle Ranjit was starving as he had had no breakfast or lunch. He sent one of the constables to the village to buy some food. The other man was sent to keep watch in front of Raju's house and report his movements over the walkie-talkie set they both carried. Both the constables were in plainclothes so as not to arouse the suspicion of the crooks.

Uncle Ranjit shifted his position slightly and sighed. He wondered how long they would have to keep vigil outside the little outhouse. He had taken a quick look inside, while Ravi Kumar, the constable, kept watch outside. He had to confirm whether the diamonds were in fact hidden under the wooden floorboards or whether his deductions were totally unfounded, in which case he would simply be wasting his time. If the diamonds were indeed there, then Raju would surely come for them. Obviously he knew that Uncle Ranjit was suspicious of him; that was why he had knocked him unconscious and left him tied up in the forest. Presuming him to be safely out of the way for the present, he would try and retrieve the diamonds from their hiding place before the police found them.

A search under the floorboards with a flashlight revealed a bag in a corner. Uncle Ranjit called out to Ravi Kumar to hand him a stick. With the stick he brought the bag within reach. Then, reaching down, he had been able to hold the bag in his hand and feel the contents.

The bag was too big to pull out; he would have had to wrench out one of the boards for that and he could not risk doing that. But there was no need to pull the bag out; Uncle Ranjit had no doubt at all as to what it contained. Why then was Raju taking so long to come and retrieve his precious haul? Uncle Ranjit knew he could do nothing unless he caught Raju red-handed with the diamonds in his possession. However, Raju was making no move at all to come and take them to a safer hiding place.

The constable who had been assigned the job of watching over Raju's house reported nothing unusual. He had seen Raju come out of the house once. He talked to a man for a moment or two and then went back inside. That was all. Uncle Ranjit was terribly disappointed. He had come so close to catching the crook. And now it looked as though it would all come to nothing.



A sinister mission

Raju looked out of the window moodily. It was drizzling now and he watched the raindrops as they made streaks across the window-pane. The man in the grey trousers and blue and white checked shirt was still standing across the road, leaning against the counter of the paan shop. Raju saw him light up a *bidi* (cheap cigarette of rolled leaf) and wondered who he was and why he was there. Of course, he might be a friend or relative of the shopkeeper, or someone spending a holiday in the village. He was evidently at a loose end for he did not seem to know what to do with himself.

Raju turned away from the window impatiently and looked at the clock on the wall again. His brother, Siva Kumar, was late. He had sent him out on an important errand and there was no sign of him. He drummed his fingers absent-mindedly on the window-sill for a moment, and then, taking his umbrella off the hook on the wall, he stepped out. He looked up and down the lane but could see no one except a woman vegetable vendor sitting on the roadside with her basket beside her. And, of course, the man in the checked shirt. What had happened to Siva Kumar? Where were the men he was to have rounded up and sent on their sinister mission?

Raju walked rapidly down the lane. He would have to do the job himself. There was no time to lose. Thanks to those meddlesome children, their uncle, the Police Inspector, had caught on to his game. Thank goodness he had been able to tie him up and get him out of the way at Upper Bhavani. He thought he had seen some

movement among the bushes near the old outhouse. Who could it be? Raju's sixth sense told him it was not safe for him to go and take out the diamonds. Yet he must get them to a safer hiding place before that Police Inspector freed himself or someone found him. He would have first to deal with whoever was there now, keeping watch outside the haunted house.

Raju looked nervously over his shoulder. There was no one about. The vegetable vendor had got up and was putting the basket on her head. There was still no sign of Siva Kumar. He walked quickly and turned the corner into the next lane. He passed by a few houses and then stopped at a small whitewashed stone hut with a tiled roof. He tapped on the door. Almost immediately, a burly man with a huge moustache opened the door. They exchanged a few words and then Raju motioned to the man to follow him. They walked on without talking until they were out of the village, and out of earshot of any chance passer-by. They stopped and sat down on an overhanging rock. Although the rain had stopped, the rock was slightly wet. Neither of the men seemed to notice it.

Certain now that no one could hear them, Raju confided his plan to the other man. "I will pay well," he said. "I want about six men, big and strong. They must be armed with knives. No guns, I want no shooting. You know the old haunted outhouse near the creche? I want you and your gang to go up there as soon as possible. There are some men hiding there. I don't know how many, maybe two or three.

"You must take them by surprise. I suggest you send one of your men into the building. They will come out

of their cover then and the rest of you can take care of them. Be sure they don't see you till then. Once you have put an end to them, throw the bodies into the building and close the door. I will dispose of them later. No one will go inside for the time being. Have you followed me so far?"

The other man grunted by way of assent. "What do we do next?"

"After this, give me a signal that the job is done. I don't want to be seen talking to you. It is safer that way. This is what you must do if your mission is successful. Take a large white handkerchief and tie it to the topmost branch of the tall pine tree that grows behind the haunted house. There is only one tree there among a clump of bushes. You will know the one I mean. I can see it from the main road below. When I see the handkerchief, I will know that the job is done. Then disappear from the village and lie low for a day or two."

"This is a very difficult job you have assigned us," said the big man, twirling his moustache thoughtfully. "I will have to pay my men well..."

"You can name the amount."

"I will want it in advance."

"We will talk about the terms," Raju rose from the rock and the other man rose with him. They started walking back to the village, still talking. Before reaching the village, they parted company. Raju looked back furtively to see if anyone had seen them. The man he had been with was the local *dada* (leader of gangsters). It would not do to be seen talking to him. There was no one about, except the woman with the basket of vegetables.

Some time later, Raju took a walk towards the haunted house. He stopped when a tall pine tree much higher up on the hill came into view, and smiled when he saw a white cloth on the treetop. He glanced at his watch and retraced his steps to the village. Everything was going as planned. It was just a question of time now before the diamonds were in his possession and he himself was safely out of the Nilgiris.



To the rescue

It was evening now and there was still no sign of Dinesh. Sujata looked at her watch. Six o'clock! He had been gone almost four hours. It would start getting dark in a few minutes. She wished for the hundredth time that either Mummy or Daddy would return. There was no way of contacting Mummy, she knew. She had phoned the Assistant Manager, Mr. Rao, and asked him to help her locate her father. She had told him it was urgent and that she feared Dinesh might be in some danger. Mr. Rao had promised to do his best. The phone rang and Sujata jumped up to answer it.

"Sujata, I am afraid I have had no luck in contacting your father," Mr. Rao sounded worried. "I have left messages at all the places he could possibly be. You said Dinesh may be in danger. You had better tell me about it. Wait a minute. I will be right over." Within a few moments his car pulled up in the porch. Sujata flew to open the door.

"Oh, Mr. Rao," she almost wept with relief at seeing him. "Dinu is trying to help Uncle Ranjit catch some crooks and he insisted on going after them. Wait a minute. I had better start from the beginning."

Once again, Sujata found herself narrating the story. She tried to be brief and precise. Mr. Rao listened intently, interrupting once or twice to ask a question. Finally he said, "Sujata, your father keeps a gun. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes. It is in his cupboard. There is a combination lock on it. I know the number." Daddy had got a licence

for a gun because the estate was cut off from civilisation and it was safer to be armed. Besides, there were still wild animals to be found in the surrounding forests and occasionally they strayed on to the estates. He had never had to use it yet.

"Good. Now take out the gun, please, and give it to me," Mr. Rao instructed Sujata. "I will go across to this haunted house of yours and try and find out what is happening. Give me the details about the location of the place and the surrounding areas." Sujata did so.

"Won't you be scared out there all by yourself?" she asked, as Mr. Rao headed towards the door.

He smiled and shook his head. "I have been up against hoodlums before. Besides, I am a black belt in karate." As he got into his car, Subu appeared on the porch.

"Missy, is there any news of baba?"

"No, Rao Sahib is going out to look for him."

"Then I am going with him."

Mr. Rao looked at Sujata and hesitated. She nodded. "Take him, Mr. Rao. There is safety in numbers."

Without another word, the two men got into the car and were soon tearing down the drive, the brakes screeching as the car took the sharp turn outside the gate.

"That boy has got guts," Mr. Rao said, as they sped along. "And brains, too. I only hope he hasn't landed himself in a mess. Do you have an idea of what is going on, Subu?"

"Yes, Sahib. Missy told me."

They pulled up at the village and parked the car in front of the little post office. Subu knew the area well and assured Mr. Rao he would be able to take him up to the haunted house. He also knew the surrounding

area, which would be a great help to them both. Ordinarily, Subu would never have ventured close to the haunted house, but because Dinesh was involved, his fears were forgotten. His only desire was to see that the boy was safe. The Inspector Sahib would look after himself, he knew, but a twelve-year-old boy...

The men walked silently, grateful for the darkness. Mr. Rao carried a powerful flashlight in his pocket. They were careful not to speak a word for sounds carried far in these quiet hills. When they reached the point where the path wound up the hill towards the creche and the outhouse, they stopped. Subu whispered, "Sahib, we will go up from here, between the tea bushes. If we crouch low, we won't be seen."

Mr. Rao put his hand in his pocket and gripped the little gun. He could pull it out in a flash if it was needed. Subu led the way, and, bent almost double, they started moving up the hill, taking care not to rustle the tea bushes. In a few minutes they were at the creche. A light sparkled in the window. Mr. Rao glanced at his watch. The dial was illuminated and he could see the time quite easily.

"It is past six-thirty," he whispered. "The labourers get off at six o' clock. They should all have taken their children home by now. But the creche is still open."

"Sometimes they get delayed at work, Sahib," Subu whispered back. "In any case, I don't think anything will happen until the creche is closed for the night and everyone has left. It is too close to the old outhouse."

"Yes, of course. Raju won't risk being seen or heard. Wait a minute, though. I think someone is leaving the creche. I heard the front door swing open. Ah, yes, the

lights too have been switched off. We can expect Raju to go into action soon."

The moments ticked by slowly. There was a cold wind blowing and it made a low, moaning sound through the trees. There was no other sound to be heard. Both men shivered. Presently, Mr. Rao whispered, "I think we should move up closer now. Come on."

Still crouched low, the two men climbed the hill noiselessly, moving up past the creche and towards the clump of trees. The little outhouse was not visible through the foliage.

"We can remain hidden here among the trees and yet get a fairly good view of what goes on," Mr. Rao said softly.

After a moment or so, Subu touched Mr. Rao's sleeve and pointed with his chin towards the building. It was difficult to see exactly what was going on in the dark but both men saw someone move and disappear inside the outhouse. Raju! He must have come at last to collect his haul. Beckoning with his hand, Mr. Rao crept closer, Subu following him.

A moment later, there was the unmistakable sound of a scuffle. The two men tensed. There was the sound of running footsteps and a muffled curse. The footsteps seemed to be coming towards them. Mr. Rao's fingers closed around the gun which he had taken out from his pocket. Then the footsteps stopped. It was hard to discern what was happening.

From the direction of the creche, a voice shouted in Tamil, "Run!" Then came a soft, muffled 'pop', like a cork being pulled out of a bottle. The men looked at one another. They both knew what that meant. Someone



had fired a gun, using a silencer. There was a rustling among the bushes and an agonised moan.

Who had been hit, the men wondered. They would have to act fast now. As they crept up a little closer, their eyes could just about make out two figures on the



ground, locked in a deadly combat. Mr. Rao decided they would have to break their cover now and come out in the open. Somebody's life could depend on it.

He shone his powerful flashlight at the men—Uncle Ranjit and Raju. For a split second the two men on the

ground looked towards the light, their mouths open in surprise. Raju was holding a gun, pointed towards the sky and Uncle Ranjit had his hand around Raju's wrist. Taking advantage of his momentary surprise and catching him completely off-guard, Uncle Ranjit brought up his knee and dealt Raju a violent blow in the stomach. The gun flew through the air and landed near Subu's feet. Subu lost no time in picking it up. The flashlight now revealed Uncle Ranjit, standing next to Raju who was doubled over in pain. Mr. Rao rushed up to him.

"Ranjit! What on earth is happening?"

Uncle Ranjit took the gun from Subu and said, "Thank goodness, you came when you did. We have got Raju now, but he threw the bag of diamonds to his brother. You hold Raju here with this gun and I will go after his brother."

"Take the gun, Ranjit. I have one with me."

Uncle Ranjit disappeared into the bushes. He must get Siva Kumar, whatever happened. Without the diamonds, he had an extremely flimsy case against Raju. Even if Raju was convicted, he would get off with a light sentence and he and his brother would still have the diamonds. Siva Kumar had had a moment's headstart over him, and in the dark it was going to be difficult to find him. The thick undergrowth would provide him excellent cover. Uncle Ranjit knew he would have to go after Siva Kumar alone. The constable had got a knife wound in his arm in his scuffle with Siva Kumar. Thank goodness, Rao and Subu were there. One of them would surely bind up the wound.

The flashlight probed into the bushes and behind trees. Siva Kumar had been hit in the leg. Surely he could not

have gone very far in his wounded condition. Fifteen minutes of intense searching revealed no sign of him. How could he have got away so fast? He must be in excruciating pain. What would a man in his state be likely to do? He would probably tie up the wound with a handkerchief and then try and make it to his house without anyone seeing him. Or, knowing that the police would search for him in his house, he might seek shelter at a friend's place till medical help reached him.

Uncle Ranjit spoke to the constable in the village on his walkie-talkie and told him to be on the alert for a wounded man entering the village. He would also get in touch with the only doctor in the village in case Siva Kumar should go to him for help. But all this would not help them retrieve the diamonds. For, even if they caught Siva Kumar, which seemed quite probable, he would surely have disposed of the diamonds by then. No, he must find him now, while the diamonds were still on his person. A further search revealed nothing. Siva Kumar had got away.

Uncle Ranjit was ready to give up the search and return to the scene where all the action had taken place—the haunted house. He was passing the creche on his way back when his flashlight revealed something on the wall, just below a window. He peered at it closely. It was a little mud. Someone must have leaned against the wall with his back to it and lifted one foot to rest on it.

He was about to move on when something struck Uncle Ranjit as significant. The mud was fresh from the evening's rain and still wet. A closer examination revealed that the mark had been made by the toe of a shoe, not the heel. That could mean only one thing.

Someone had climbed in through the window, scuffing the toe of his shoe against the wall as he did so! Uncle Ranjit shone his flashlight through the glass pane into the room. There was no one in the room. But there were corners of the room the flashlight could not reach. There was only one thing to do. Wrapping his handkerchief around his hand, he drove it through the glass. In a trice he had opened the bolt from inside and climbed into the room. Crouching in a corner, his hands clasped around his wounded leg, was Siva Kumar.

* * *

"You got him! Oh, thank goodness. We thought he would make a getaway with the diamonds."

"He very nearly did."

The two crooks' hands were securely tied with ropes, and with the guns still pointed against their backs, the group wound its way down the hill.

"How on earth did you land up here, Rao?"

"It is a long story. I will tell you later. But first tell me, Ranjit, where is Dinesh? We all thought he was here with you. Is the boy safe?"

"Yes, as far as I know. He didn't join me here. I didn't permit it. It would have been too dangerous. Now I must get these two men to the police station and turn them in. We will have to go to the next village. There is no police station here. But before that I must get a doctor to look at these wounds. Fortunately they are just flesh wounds." He looked at the constable as he spoke. Ravi Kumar's arm had been neatly bound and the flow of blood staunched.



"I have got my car," Mr. Rao said.

"Oh, good."

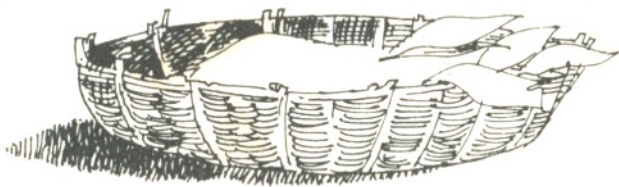
They had reached the main road now. It was bitterly cold and the icy wind was still blowing. The headlights of a car coming towards them gleamed in the distance. As the car drew near them, it screeched to a halt. Dinesh and Sujata's father got out.

"Oh, praise God, you are safe, all of you. But where is Dinesh?"

"If he isn't safely back home by now, he must be somewhere in the village," said Uncle Ranjit.

"Come on, all of you. Get in. We will drive to the village. I suppose I will have these two beauties up in front with me?"

Uncle Ranjit laughed. They all got into the car, glad to be out of the cold. They were at the village in a few moments and drew up beside Mr. Rao's car. Sitting there in the back seat was a man in a blue and white checked shirt and a woman vegetable vendor with her basket beside her. Seeing the look of surprise on their faces, the two burst out laughing.



Explanations

The fire blazed cheerfully in the living room. Anthony had brought in mugs of steaming hot *rasam* (beverage of spiced pepper-water). Everyone's eyes were fixed on Uncle Ranjit as they waited for him to tie up all the loose ends in the story. There were so many questions coming to their minds. How did he know? When did he start getting suspicious? What...Who...Where?

Uncle Ranjit was certainly taking his own time in answering all the questions. He sipped his *rasam* appreciatively and gingerly touched the nasty bruise on his head. Mummy had applied a cold pack to it and swelling had gone down. He had rubbed an ointment on his chafed wrists and ankles. Now, feeling much better, he was ready to launch into his narrative.

"Something clicked in my mind when Sue told me about her air bag being exchanged. I was inclined at first to think it was pure chance. An identical air bag belonging to another passenger in the train, perhaps somebody sitting next to her, gets exchanged with hers. The passenger alights at a station, taking Sue's bag with him and leaving his own, purely by mistake. It was possible.

"But my policeman's mind questioned the coincidence. Could it have been deliberate? Did someone want Sue's bag, and if so, why? Obviously, not because of what Sue had in it. That could be of no value whatever. Then, was something else being smuggled out in it, something of real value? My mind jumped to the diamonds at once but I told myself I was being fanciful. I had the case so much on my mind, I was imagining that everything was

connected with it. Nevertheless, the idea stuck." He paused and sipped his *rasam*.

"What led you to believe the bag really did contain the diamonds? And how do you explain the diamonds landing up there in the first place?" Dinesh asked.

"I am coming to that," Uncle Ranjit said, draining his mug. "When you told me Raju and his wife Shanti were from your school, Dinu, I began to wonder if they had a hand in it. It would be easy for an *ayah* (female servant) working in the girls' dorm to plant the diamonds in Sue's bag, after it had been packed and was ready to be loaded on the bus. The diamonds would be placed at the bottom of the bag, so even if Sue opened it for something, let us say her sandwiches or tuck for the journey, she certainly wouldn't come across them. And long before she got home, the switch would have been made.

"It was a safe bet that no one would notice. If either of you children did see someone getting off the train with a bag that looked like Sue's, you would first check under your seat and find an identical one. It wouldn't strike you that it had been switched.

"And then there was your story of how Champ went after a man carrying a bag that looked just like Sue's. If that was indeed Sue's bag, then Champ's chasing the man made sense."

"But why put the diamonds in Sue's bag at all? Why go through all that trouble of switching bags?" Mummy wanted to know.

"Because the police have been searching for those diamonds. They have been carrying out random checks on all trains, buses and other vehicles leaving the big

cities. You told me, Dinu, that you saw some policemen walking up and down the platform at Coimbatore.” Dinesh nodded. “The chances were that no one would think of checking a schoolgirl’s bag. Once the checking was over and the policemen had got off the train, the bags would be switched.”

“How did you guess that the haunted house was being used as a hiding place for the diamonds?” asked Daddy.

“Ah, that. By the time the children told me about their adventure out there, I was already suspicious of Raju. The fact that he and his wife were from your school provided them with the opportunity of transporting the diamonds to this area. Probably the idea was to keep them hidden till the hue and cry over them died down a bit. Also, out here in the Nilgiris, where it is so peaceful and quiet and not a police outpost within several miles of their village, they must have been pretty sure they wouldn’t be caught. However, opportunity by itself is no proof. I had nothing else to go on. It is not even as though I was actually suspicious really, it is just that the thought crossed my mind as a possibility.”

“And how did our story confirm your suspicions?” asked Sujata.

“It all fitted in. Raju would need a place that was safe—a place nobody ever visited or even went anywhere close to, for that matter. What better place than a so-called haunted house? Nobody had been anywhere near it for years and he knew very well that the local people believed it was haunted. No, his hiding place would have been safe if you children hadn’t tumbled on to it.”

“You mean the place wasn’t haunted or anything like that? What about the sounds we heard both times we

went there, the crying and the shooting?" Dinesh asked, frowning.

"Those were stage-managed by Raju. He must have hidden among the bushes the first time and made those dreadful crying sounds that frightened you so badly."

"But the second time? He was with us when we heard the gunshots. He couldn't have done that."

"Oh, I daresay he got his brother to fire the shots. Don't forget, his brother has been his accomplice all along."

"But, Uncle Ranjit, we first heard the story of the haunted house from Subu. He couldn't have made it all up. After all, he helped us," Sujata pointed out.

"Oh, yes, the legend has probably been in existence, all right. That is what made Raju so sure no one would go there. No, Subu didn't make up the story. What you children actually experienced was managed by Raju."

"Hmmm," Daddy said thoughtfully. "Yes, it all fits in, Ranjit. Raju had to frighten the children to make them stay away. It would never do to have them discover his hiding place."

"He *did* frighten us, and badly," Dinesh laughed.

"I must say it is frightfully clever of you to have linked Raju with the whole affair. You had so little to go on," Mr. Rao spoke for the first time.

"To tell you the truth, I watched his reaction when he first heard I was in the police and was working on this case. I saw the look of alarm on his face. It was fleeting, to be sure, but unmistakable. And Champ confirmed it by growling. Dogs sense fear, you know."

"Oh, yes, I remember. This was while we were having our picnic lunch yesterday on the way to Upper Bhavani.

You mean you said all that only to watch his reaction?" Sujata asked.

"Ummmm hmmmm."

"I am curious about what happened at Upper Bhavani," Mummy said. "What did you do and where did you go last night?"

Uncle Ranjit smiled. "You have two very bright youngsters, *didi*. I am really impressed at the way they correctly interpreted my actions. You see, by this time I was sure that Raju was the crook. I had to get some sort of okay from my headquarters. After all, I was on vacation. I couldn't go around arresting people without an arrest warrant. I had to be sure headquarters would support me. Also, it struck me that possibly Raju had a criminal record, in which case his photograph would be on the files."

"We guessed as much," Sujata said excitedly.

"I know. That was very clever of you. I took those photographs and then took the film down to the police station. I spoke over their radio to Madras. Fortunately, I was able to talk to my colleague who is handling this case. He was on night duty. That was a real stroke of luck. I told him everything I knew. He told me to rush the film across to Madras by a special messenger. He would develop it and let me know the result. The constable left immediately for Coimbatore. It wouldn't have taken him more than a couple of hours to get there. From there he went by a special helicopter to Madras.

"By eight this morning, the police station in the village near Upper Bhavani had radio confirmation that Raju was indeed on their list of wanted criminals. He was using an alias, of course. They also radioed permission

for me to make arrests and ordered the officer on duty to help me in every way. Two men came with me and we set up our vigil outside the haunted house."

"How did Raju know you were there?" asked Daddy.

"I don't know. He ought really to have presumed me safely out of the way—bound and unconscious. Maybe he saw or heard us or someone reported having seen two men go up the hill. Or maybe he was merely playing it safe. Whatever it was, he decided he would hire the local gangsters to go out and investigate and bump off anyone who might be there. And I must say, if it wasn't for Dinu here, you would be one relative short."

Mummy and Daddy smiled proudly at Dinesh, who suddenly became very busy inspecting his nails. Mummy reached out and touched his arm. Daddy said, "Well done, son. Would you like to tell us what happened?"

"Oh, it was a big lark, really. I had dressed up once as a woman vegetable vendor at a fancy dress in school and everyone said the costume was really good and they would never have known me. I couldn't afford to be seen by Raju. It would have given the whole game away. I had to be sure he didn't recognise me. So, when I got off the bus, the first thing I did was to buy the whole basket of vegetables of the *sabziwallah* (vegetable vendor) in the village. By the way, Uncle Ranjit, that cost me most of my Christmas allowance!"

Everyone laughed. Mummy said, "I will buy it off you, Dinu. It is two days to Christmas and I can use all those vegetables for the servants' Christmas lunch. What happened next?"

"I walked up and down the lane in front of Raju's house once or twice. I saw your man, Uncle Ranjit, standing aimlessly in front of the paan shop, opposite Raju's house. When he thought no one was looking, he moved away and went behind a huge banyan tree and took out his walkie-talkie to talk to you. When he finished talking, I went up to him and tried to sell him my vegetables. Obviously he didn't want any. So I said, 'Why don't you buy some for Inspector Ranjit?' You should have seen his face! Anyway, I told him who I was. After that I joined him in his watch outside Raju's house.

"When Raju came out and started talking to that local *dada*, I followed them. They sat down on an overhanging rock not knowing, of course, that I was hiding under it. I had a tough time following all that they were saying. I barely got the gist of it. I am glad I did, Uncle Ranjit, or else you would be a dead duck."

"You can say that again."

"Anyway, I got back to your man as soon as I could and he took matters into his own hands. Before Raju's pal was able to contact his gang, our man waylaid him and gave him a whopper on his head. Then he tied him up and left him under the same rock. That is where he was when you got back to the village and, of course, you were able to hand him over to the police along with Raju and his brother."

He turned back to the others. "Raju had fixed on a pre-arranged signal—once the hired killers had done their job, they were to tie a white handkerchief on the tall pine tree, to let him know they had been successful. We told Uncle Ranjit about that on the walkie-talkie

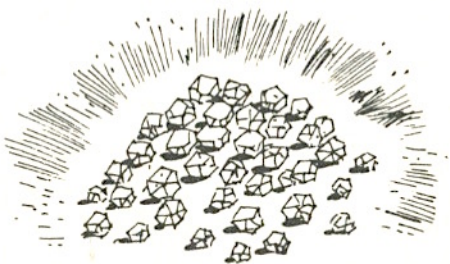
and he arranged to have the handkerchief tied on the tree. That gave Raju the assurance that it was safe for him to go after his precious diamonds."

"Yes, Diṇu, I owe my success in catching the crooks to you and Sue. That was very smart thinking on your part, both of you. Sue, if you hadn't informed Mr. Rao, Raju's brother would have got away with the diamonds. We got Raju all right, but he threw the bag to his brother. Because you and Subu appeared when you did, Mr. Rao, I was able to go after Siva Kumar. So I am extremely grateful to you both as well."

He turned to the children. "The Police Department has offered a large reward for the return of the diamonds. I would like it to be shared equally between you two, Mr. Rao and Subu."

"But what about you?" Daddy asked. "It seems to me you deserve the lion's share of it."

Uncle Ranjit shook his head and smiled. "This was all in a day's work for me. And now *didi*, how about that celebration dinner you promised? I am starving."





A chance exchange of bags,
a haunted house,
a quiet fishing weekend.
What could all these
have in common,
wonder twins Dinesh and Sujata,
with the case of missing diamonds
their Uncle Ranjit,
an Inspector of Police,
is investigating!
The quiet, sprawling tea estates
of the Nilgiris are witness to a
quick series of action
as the twins and their uncle
shatter the crooks' well-laid plans
and retrieve the gems,
with a little help from Champ,
their Alsatian.